

Regional literature

Selvia A

Sundara Ramaswamy

TALE OF A TAMARIND
TREE

Translated from the Tamil by
S. Krishnan

*veerabalan
Thirupavai
Panchatantra*



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TRANSLATOR'S NOTE (20)

Vandana

Tale of a Tamarind Tree, when it came out in the Sixties, was immediately recognized as one of the most unusual novels ever to have been written in Tamil. Its theme and scope, and the treatment set it apart.

The novel is different in that it attempts magical realism before the phrase had become popular. It uses an extended metaphor to present a complex web of human relationships. The metaphor is the tree itself, autonomous in origin, the blind observer of everything going on in its shade, indifferent provider of shelter, the mute witness of a generation's rise and fall.

Sundara Ramaswamy has set his story in a town in the border area between the former state of Travancore and Tamil Nadu, in the deep south of India. He easily evokes an atmosphere of brooding mystery, of darkness visible, in the first few chapters, but makes the transition to the urbanization of the tree's surroundings without effort.

Tale of a Tamarind Tree has not been easy to translate. Tamil and English are vastly different languages, belonging to totally different language groups, but they can still be rendered into one another without too much trauma. Many nuances and intangibles will necessarily be lost, but the author's intention can be clearly revealed. But *Tamarind Tree* poses a special problem, as almost all the characters in it speak a special kind of patois, unique to the border area, for which no English equivalent can be found. It is a dialect which even

other native Tamil speakers have difficulty following. The narrator of the story does not present any difficulty as he tells his story in what might be called standard Tamil. But dialogue dominates the novel, and it seemed best to translate the conversations into straightforward, even colourless English, eschewing phrases and idioms that are native to English. This is what I have done. Here and there, I have also paraphrased, added or deleted sentences, in the interest of clarity. I hope I have done so without causing any injury to the author's intent. All translation is a calculated risk anyway.

79. in Tamil

CHAPTER ONE

The tamarind tree stood at a crossroads. The cement road in front of it went due south to land's end where three seas meet. The road to the north went to Trivandrum, and possibly as far as Bombay, perhaps even to the Himalayas. Maybe it went even beyond. Wherever man sets foot is a path. The road from the west behind the tamarind tree divided into two which went around the tree and joined the cement road. One does not know where these roads began, they probably went from coast to coast, but all of them met at the tamarind tree.

It was a very old tree, and signs of its great age were all over it. From a distance it looked like an old woman, crooked and bent, hair grown grey, lost in a world of her own, reliving memories of happier days. A tree that had survived in dignity for many many years, and left to itself, would have come to a natural end, but that was not to be. Man, urgent in his need, insatiable and unreasonable, cut it down until it was a bare stump. The memory of the tree, glorious in its heyday, then wantonly destroyed, will never leave us. Some memories are forever. Standing at the crossroads, the tree had an air of permanence, and exuded a feeling that in it the art of creation had reached its ultimate perfection.

The tree had nothing to do with what happened around it, or under its shade. It was only a mute witness to the actions of the people who sought its shelter, witness to their goodness, to their folly, to tears and laughter, to selfishness and sacrifice, to

jealousy, to love turned to hate. It was there, a natural presence, a benevolent presence, which did no harm to anybody. It was born by itself, it grew by itself, it sprouted leaves, it bloomed and gave forth fruit. Its leaves fell on the ground during the ripening season, merged with the soil, and renewed it. Its branches reached out to the skies, while its roots went deep into the earth. It sustained itself, it needed nothing from any source. In the end it fell victim to man's greed, it was something to be used for his needs. It hardly had a chance, it was cut down. This is the story of the life and death of the tamarind tree. I had thought that with the tree gone, there would be a great emptiness where it stood. Others obviously did not think so, but the tree prevailed. A heavy traffic now goes around where the tree stood. People may have forgotten the tree, but the sense of order it taught, without meaning to, has stayed behind.

Damodara Asan would often say, man is the creator, the preserver, and the destroyer. He was a philosopher in his own fashion, and though neither he nor we made that claim for him, he was one just the same. He would say, I don't believe in anything but man himself, in his abilities and capabilities. In those days we were not interested in philosophy. We recognized only three figures of authority: father, teacher, and policeman. The others played no important part in our lives.

We were in particular not interested in Asan's philosophy, even assuming we made some sense out of it, but it was Asan himself who was the centre of our universe. When school was over we used to trail him like shadows. We wanted to spend all our time with him. No parent approved of Asan but no young boy could resist his appeal. We were scolded at home

for spending so much time in his company. Our teachers were furious at his hold over us. When we got home after spending a long evening with him, we would frequently find the house bolted from within, and we would sleep on the platform outside the house. And make plans on how to get together with him again the next day.

What drew us to Asan was simply that he was a treasure-house of stories, and a master storyteller. We were fascinated by the variety of his stories, and the way he brought characters to life. When we went to bed after spending two or three hours with him, his voice would continue to ring in our ears, while the people from his stories would keep appearing in our dreams.

He was about eighty years old when we knew him, but would admit only to sixty-three as he did not want people commenting on how strong he was for an eighty-year-old man. He certainly was very strong. He could remove the husk from a hundred coconuts at a time. He walked five miles a day. He could thread a needle. He had broad shoulders, and his expansive back and chest and his forearms were covered with thick, curly black hair. He used to challenge everyone to arm wrestling, holding up his arm with his elbow flat on a table, and defying anybody to push his arm down. No one could. A feeble Brahmin boy like me would amuse him particularly. 'Ah, here comes the Iyer. He won't rest until he bends my arm. He thinks it is a stalk of spinach.' And he would make good-humoured contemptuous noises until I retreated in shame.

School-closing at five would see us all on the Asaripallam road, halfway down which Joseph's laundry was located. Asan would be sitting on a

*response
story with
an introduction*

bench in front of the shop, his thick six-foot walking-stick resting between his legs and making a hole in the ground, he clasping it with both hands around its neck. On seeing us, he would get off the bench, lift his ankle-long veshti, double it around his waist for easy mobility, with his underwear clearly visible, and would sally forth.

He usually did not talk as he strode along, though we would be twittering like mad as we followed him. Our destination was an ancient structure, two miles out of town, which had once upon a time, according to tradition, been used as a gallows-shed. The closer one got to it, the more dilapidated it looked. Its sole occupant was an insane woman, who always stood in a diving posture. Asan would sit in front of the mantapam, with us dutifully seated in front of him, making sure we had a clear view of his face. The proceedings would start with one of us offering him rolls of paan leaf, nuts to chew with it, and two packs of the best Jaffna chewing tobacco, all of which we had acquired on the way by pooling our resources. Asan would chew the leaves, nuts and tobacco, ostentatiously clear his throat, relishing the flavour of the tobacco, spit out some of the leaves, clear his throat again to enjoy the tobacco flavour, and after making some satisfied noises, would be ready to tell the story of the evening.

Not for Asan any conventional opening, like, once upon a time there was a king and queen, and so forth. He was a master of the art of storytelling, and after a brief silence, he would ask if any of us knew what a particular plant was, which he would point out. Of course we did not know. 'The way you blink at one another, it's obvious you don't know. All right, pick a couple of leaves, crush them and take a

good sniff.' A couple of us do so, and the question comes, 'What do you smell?' We do not know how to describe the smell. Asan would then say: 'Doesn't smell like new, unused and unwashed clothes kept for a time in a fibre box, does it?' We would be amazed at this precise description of what we had smelt.

dirty
'It was by giving this to him that the slut killed her lawfully wedded husband.' The story has begun. 'How could a woman behave like that? All right, she wanted to marry this other fellow, come what may, but why? Was her husband lame or blind or short? Did he have a mistress? No. He was a fine fellow. Every harvest he reaped a hundred barrels of paddy. His plantain trees in the backyard yielded at least fifty leaves a day. He had so many animals in his cattle shed that it took half an hour every day to clean it. He lacked nothing. One day, he went to the Vadaseri fair to buy a couple of riding bulls, and came back with a pair of Arab horses. He bought flowers for the slut-wife, as he always did when he went to the fair. And what happened? She gave him what he thought was milk, he vomited blood twice, story closed.'

Asan would begin his stories thus, with no preliminaries, sometimes from the middle, sometimes even from the end, and having evoked our interest, would sit back for a while, arranging the paan leaves, nuts and tobacco on a towel in front of him, for a second round of chewing. Then would follow an account of the early years of the woman who poisoned her husband, and her entire background would be described at some length. Just when we thought he was reaching a climax, he would casually drop his narration, and begin chewing again. As we

He was able to
report his
audience to the
world of fiction.
A narrator from
oral tradition
Every writer is a
historian of some
kind. When the
historian writes
about the world
history, the
creative writer
writes the local
& personal history

sat entranced waiting for more, the bell in the Bishop's Palace would ring the hour of ten, and we would slowly come back to our senses. Vague reminders of home, father, mother, class tests, would come back to us. We would start homewards again.

Another storyteller like Asan is not likely to be born again, and he is no longer here. He died before the tamarind tree did. It was only from Asan that we heard the old stories about the tamarind tree. He always said that our town grew very fast. He would describe what the tamarind tree area was like fifty years ago, and what a bright-lit bustling place it is today. He was proud that he had seen people and incidents that we had not seen, but he could also see what we were seeing. If we had been born a few years later, we would never have heard those marvellous stories as only Asan could tell them, and he would have been dead. Historians are not likely to have been interested in the tamarind tree. We were the lucky ones.

In those days, the tamarind tree was surrounded by a very deep tank, which was naturally called the tamarind tree tank. The tamarind tree stood on an island in the middle of the tank. It was not much of an island really; it had enough room for two groups of boys to play their various games. The tank had water throughout the year, and people used it for their morning ablutions. An overlay of lotus leaves covered with mosses kept the bad smell down.

To the south of the tamarind tank, only a short distance away, were innumerable casuarina groves, which served as a pleasant resting place for the lazy and unemployed during the day.

People did not usually frequent the banks of the tank except in the mornings. All day long, ring-tailed pigs had the place to themselves, and would root

around, foraging for food. When the rains came, new grass would sprout, and the cattle would be brought for grazing. In those days, the main road wound east of the tank about two and a half miles away. The cowherds would bathe the cattle gently, dunking them under the water; and, sending them back to the banks, they would swim to the tamarind tree to play in its shade until sunset, when they would return to the town with the cattle. Many came there to search for rare herbs. Damodara Asan did too and he was totally familiar with the area.

One day he said, out of the blue: 'Young women would not even dream of going near the tree. Old women would come to collect dung for fuel. Children might, but, young women—never, in those days. They wouldn't even sleep with their head in this direction.'

One of us asked Asan, rather rhetorically: 'Why, were lust-laden young men waiting there, eagerly anticipating romance?'

Asan brushed the question aside. 'No, nothing like that. In the old days women came and went as they pleased. But after what happened to Chellathayi, Kaliappan's daughter, how would any young woman dare go there? This man came from God knew where, nobody knew his name, in fact nobody had seen him before. He grabbed her by the hand and laid her down by the tree ...'

Asan had started to tell a story. He had told us this story several times before, but we never tired of it. We were ready to listen to it as often as he felt like telling it.

After transplanting the seeds in the field, Chellathayi was returning home with her friends, had a minor argument with them, and walked along the

was struck by beauty of the moon

short-cut by the side of the tank. It was the night of the full moon and everything lay cloaked in the celestial light. The heavy rain the previous day had filled the tank up, and little waves rippled along the water and crashed against the banks.

Chellathayi thrilled all over. She waded into the water up to her knees, splashed the water about, washed her face with it, gargled her mouth with it. And the desire to bathe in it came upon her suddenly, so she entered the water.

There was not a soul in sight. A branch of the tree sliced the moon into two, a beautiful sight. She removed her clothes, splashed about happily, telling herself that she had never had a bath like that before.

Only when her body became thoroughly chilled, and her limbs began to tremble, did she realize how much time she had spent there. Her friends would have reached home long ago. 'One final dip,' she said to herself, and dunked herself into the water. When she came up for breath, she saw the tamarind tree. It had always been there, and of course she had known it, but now it looked as if it were standing in solitary splendour between the humps of two enormous elephants. She was entranced and decided to swim to the tree.

When she stood under the tree and looked around, it was as if she were in a strange country. The casuarina trees danced wildly in the wind. At a distance the field she had worked in all day looked like a green shawl that had fallen off the shoulder of a man walking in a hurry. She looked around, laughing in delight at the enchanted scene, as she kept squeezing the water from her hair.

Suddenly she heard footsteps behind her. She turned around in a panic. A big, well-built man was

standing there. He had a big tuft of hair in the back of his head, rings in his ear, and was wearing a silk shirt. His arms reached his knees.

She covered her breasts with crossed arms. She was unable to utter a sound. She stood frozen. He gazed at her eyes for a moment, calmly stepped towards her, picked her up as if she were a small child, laid her against the foot of the tree, and leaned over her.

She was able to shout only after a few minutes. Some men sleeping in the casuarina grove heard her screaming and rushed to the tank. When he saw them, he deliberately jumped into the tank and swam over to the eastern side. They ran after him, shouting 'Catch him! Catch him!' but they could not reach him. As they seemed to close in on him, he kept increasing his speed. That they could not get near him was surprising but true.

Damodara Asan was among those who ran after him. 'I too ran to catch him. If I had caught the fellow I would have rubbed him into the ground. But who can believe that running fast you still could not stop a man who simply seemed to be walking fast? What a gait! What movement,' he repeated, marvelling all over at the memory.

When the man reached the screw pine grove, he jumped over a waist high anthill effortlessly, and disappeared.

'I have never in all my life seen someone so agile, so fast! And his appearance! He looked an image in gold. And the way his arms reached almost to the ground...'

What happened to Chellathayi afterwards is the most extraordinary thing about the story. She started pining for the stranger. All day she talked about him.

(All night she cried for him.) Every evening she went to bathe in the tamarind tank, and she swam across to the tree under which she sat, dripping with water. Sometimes she would, even when it was late, go up to the anthill, infested with snakes, to look for him. People tried to advise her, and tried to stop her from going to the tree daily, but she paid no heed to them. The peasants refused to let her work in the fields any longer, as they felt her presence would ruin the crops. She did not much care and she was happy to stay at home.

What a fine specimen of young womanhood she had been: splendid body, natural beauty, the beauty that good health and youth gave her, serenity, innocence, all of which combined to make her into a goddess of beauty; all of it was now gone. She began to look like a plucked chicken. She lost interest in food. As soon as she tried to put some food into her mouth, she would begin to retch, put the food away and leave her plate otherwise untouched. The girls of the town performed a special puja for her. They wound charms and talismans on her neck and hands. They performed special rites for warding off the evil eye. But she grew weaker and thinner with every passing day.

The news spread like wildfire one day. It was reported that he had come to her house the previous night. She herself told her friends this.

People said that from then on, he visited her every full moon night, though nobody actually saw him. They only had her word for it, but they believed her. Whenever she appeared with her hair combed and decked with flowers, they knew it was the night of the full moon. She would also smear herself, head to toe, with sandal paste. The next morning, her

girlfriends would surround her on their way to work to hear all about his visit. She would regale them with accounts of his dalliance, his naughty and mischievous behaviour. They would listen spellbound, their eyes eager with longing, their hearts flutter at her ecstasy. ^{to amuse with stories or jokes} ^{bliss} ^{ecstasy}

Damodara Asan also went to see her in his somewhat dubious capacity as a doctor. He told us that she herself told to him her story at some length. She was gross in some of the things she said but without any awareness of being so. Her ingenuousness removed all traces of any doubt I may have retained in my heart, said Asan with a restrained laugh, showing his stained teeth.

'So what happened finally? Please don't keep us in suspense,' we would beg him.

After a few months, Chellathayi announced to her friends that she was pregnant. Nobody doubted it for a moment. 'Ah, you should have seen the girl then! Unbelievable!' said Asan.

We asked, 'Was she so beautiful then?'

'Beautiful is not the word. We see beauty of all kinds daily, but she couldn't be put in any class. All I can say is that other women considered beautiful wanted to hang themselves when they saw her — it was that kind of beauty.'

The girl positively bloomed. Her good health had returned. Her friends were bewildered by her, and they dared not even speak to her. Is this the Chellathayi we used to know, was the thought that ran through their heads. They could think of nothing to say to her. She seemed a different being, and they were ashamed of the kind of thoughts they had thought about her.

Chellathayi ordered a beautiful cradle, and silk dresses for the baby. She sent for wooden toys through people who went to festivals, unmindful of the cost.

And on a day, when the morning star was about to rise, her scream pierced through the town, and people went rushing to her. She was rolling on the ground, hitting herself on her head so hard that the skull seemed likely to crack, and wailing and keening unceasingly. When one could make some sense of what she was trying to say through her sobs, it turned out that her husband had been stung by a cobra in the screw pine grove. She said she had seen it for herself—the cobra had coiled itself around him from head to foot, with its mouth clamped on his right foot, and the tip of its tail probing his left ear. A dozen persons, armed with sticks and spears, searched the screw pine grove most exhaustively, but found nothing.

The next day, Chellathayi's nude body was found hanging from one of the higher limbs of the tamarind tree. She had hung herself with the sari she was wearing.

The story was over.

Asan picked up his stick and walked away without a formal word of goodbye. His job for the day was finished. He could now sleep in peace. We for our part again remembered such mundane things as house and college, and made our way to our respective houses, filled with distasteful thoughts about the scoldings, angry red eyes and knit brows, and roars of disapproval we would encounter when we got home. Halfway to my house, the street-lights went off that night.

CHAPTER TWO

D amodara Asan suddenly disappeared. We waited for him the next day, and the following days in Joseph's laundry, but it was a futile wait. There was no trace of him. Joseph speculated that he might have gone to his mistress's house in Sandanpudur. Could be. Asan was a strange man, his movements known only to him and his shadow. Disappearing without a word to anyone one day, and showing up again unexpectedly after a few days, and continuing his conversation as if nothing had happened in the meantime, was one of his practices. Whatever we knew about his private life was mere hearsay. The Asan who told us such elaborate stories never gave us even an inkling of his life away from us. As Joseph used to say, his heart was like the secret chamber of a Dindigul steel safe. We never found the key, even at the very end.

I do not remember now when Asan resurfaced, having disappeared after telling us the marvellous story of Chellathayi, but he was a different man, in appearance. Gone was the strong, stern body. I can still see him in my mind's eye, thin, wan and weak. He looked as if he had gone through a severe fever. His body sagged, and his bones stuck out. We were deeply moved and asked him all sorts of questions about what had happened. He talked about this and that and bluffed his way through without giving us even a bit of information. He was a master of the art of hiding the deepest grief and keeping it to himself. His faith in himself was intense. As long as he had a

voice left, a few persons in front of him to listen to his stories, and a bolt of Jaffna tobacco, it seemed to us that all pain and unhappiness just fled from him. A man who kept the meaninglessness of time away from him simply by telling stories, an artist who cultivated storytelling as an offering to the divine, that was Asan. In this country of ours where it is a custom to provide support to artists, good and bad, it was a pity that no royal or rich patron came forth to take Asan under his wing, and cherish him as artists should be cherished.

Behind Joseph's laundry table and without attracting the attention of Asan, we pooled our resources. Kuttappan picked up the tiffin-carrier and, as he was leaving to get the edibles for the evening, Asan ordered him in a stentorian voice to get two Kali Mark cheroots also.

Asan had his fill of the refreshments, lit a cheroot, took a couple of drags, and his stern face relaxed. The rocking of his legs underneath his veshti reminded me of a happily suckling calf wagging its tail. Pappu, who was sitting on a stool, now went up to him and stared at him. 'Well, you dolt,' said Asan affectionately, 'what is the matter?'

Pappu said, 'What is this, Asan, you went away without finishing the story. You just disappeared.'

Kaliappan added, 'You never solved the riddle of the man with the tuft and the ear-rings and you said the story was finished.'

Joseph, who was ironing something on the table, looked up, rested the iron, and demanded, 'Hey, who was that who came with a tuft and ear-rings?' I told Joseph the main outline of Chellathayi's story. Until I finished Asan was looking keenly at Joseph's face. Joseph's dark lips parted slightly, in a smile. Asan

turned away and kept staring intently at the Ulakkai falls which glistened like a decoration on the hill to the west. Behind his back, Joseph made a hand signal indicating that Asan's story was made up, false. At which point, Asan whirled around, roared, 'Hey, fellow, you are digging a pit behind my back,' and raising his stick, challenged, 'If you are really a male, come in front of me and slap your thighs to show you will fight me.'

Joseph laughed and tried to say something, but Asan would not let him get a word in. Instead, he walked threateningly into the shop, his stick as much a weapon as a support, and shouted, 'What are you babbling about? I was the one who with great presence of mind saved the tree from that sinner that day. If you deny this, would the tree be standing there today? Tell me, who was responsible for men and women, and children and tiny tots enjoying the shelter of the tree today? Tell me, who was responsible for saving the tree so that all these shops could spring up under its shade and conduct such brisk business? Put your hand on your heart and tell these brats who was responsible for saving the tree?' and he thumped the ironing table vigorously.

'What you said just now is true,' said Joseph.

'What is true?' demanded Asan.

'The tree would certainly have been ^{fallen} felled if your idea hadn't worked,' said Joseph.

'You agree?'

'Yes, I agree.'

'Then shut up and stay quiet.' Asan descended from the shop triumphantly. Joseph tried again, tentatively, 'I was not talking about that,' but Asan stopped him short. 'You agreed, didn't you? Then no further discussion, and don't try to bluff your way

out.' We laughed uproariously at Asan's victory, laughter in which he joined boisterously. Presently peace reigned.

'Let it go now,' said Pappu. 'What were you talking about just now, tell us about it.'

'Don't hurry me, boy, I haven't yet had a chance to chew my leaves,' responded Asan, still in a state of euphoria over having worsted Joseph, at least to his own satisfaction. He pulled out the packet of paan leaves from the pouch in his waist. We seated ourselves comfortably around him.

'Don't think I am talking in jest. Everything is absolutely true, I swear on my eyes. That day the tamarind tree would have been cut down, if I had not interfered. Fate took me there at the right moment when that wretch was trying to sink his axe into the trunk. From behind him, I grabbed his arm as he swung the axe again. I did. It was two o'clock. Heart of the night. And who was it who was trying to cut down the tree? Koplan, priest of the Madayadi Madan temple. His eyes were blood-red, like a newly slaughtered ram's thigh. He was completely drunk. Axe in his right hand. "Wait, Koplan, wait," I shouted, and held his axe-hand with consummate ease. The axe stood in mid-air as soon as he saw me. I still laugh when I think about it,' and Asan laughed loudly. We also laughed and grinned back as Asan's back and shoulders shook with laughter.

'It was a tricky situation, see? I might have succeeded in stopping Koplan, or my head might have been rolling on the ground. You never know when death is waiting for you. Come what may, I said to myself, and threw myself in his way. If I hadn't had the presence of mind to stop him, that rotten sinner would have cut the tree to the root,' said Asan.

Chellasami asked, 'Who came to cut the tree?'

'Koplan, I told you.'

'What did he want to cut the tree for?'

Before Asan could answer, Pappu asked, 'How did you get there, in the first place, and at the right moment. Tell us that first.'

Thiruvazhi chimed in, 'You are tying us up in knots, and leaving us in the forest, blindfolded,' said Thiruvazhi coaxingly.

Asan again roared with laughter at the game of blindman's buff he had led us into playing. But then he started all over again.

'Remember I told you the other day that Chellathayi hanged herself?' Like school-children we cried, yes, yes, in chorus. Asan rested his weight with his right arm on the bench, turned around, pursed his lips with his fingers, and spat out the tobacco juice. He cleared his throat.

'Obviously they learnt about Chellathayi's death by hanging from some cowherds only after the dark had set in. Poor Sornam (Chellathayi's mother) with her sari trailing behind her ran all the three miles to the tamarind tank. When I saw Kaliappan (Chellathayi's father) also run behind her, overtaking her now and then, I realized something was wrong, found out what had happened, and I followed them. I had nothing much else to do.

'It was pitch dark, see? At that hour only bats would go to the tamarind tank. Or jackals would come down from the western hills, insects would be crawling around. If anyone born to a man went there at that hour, it would only mean that he had lost interest in living. Why did I go? Those were days when Asan amounted to something. If you mentioned my name, even a snake would shed its

skin.' We looked at one another in silent acknowledgement of this boasting. Asan cleared his throat noisily a couple of times and proceeded.

'Kaliappan and Sornam were keening loudly under the tamarind tree. I supported myself against a casuarina tree. Dear God, I have never seen anyone cry as Sornam did that night. Her lament was wrung from her breast. She kept flailing herself with her arms. Believe me or not, and I swear upon my eyes, I also cried bitterly.

'I looked at the tree from the tank bund. I could see something like a scarecrow dangling from the tree. I was drenched with sweat, and all I wanted to see was a light, even a lit match. Suddenly, I heard a noise behind me. A crowd from Kizhacheri was approaching the tank as fast as they could. One of them was carrying a long ladder. The man in front of him and the man behind him were carrying banana stems. Leading the group was a boy with a lantern who ran now, walked now and limped now. When they saw me, they shouted, 'Who's that?' but I pretended to be a lunatic, whirled round and round, and made crazy noises and ran away from there. They laughed and went on with their work.

'I then went into the town, to the clock-tower, and had a cup of tea at Nattuvakkalai Shanmugham's shop — you know, the son of Pecchi, our townsman from Eracchakulam — lit a cheroot, and was on my way again when I saw Koplan walking rapidly in front of me. His hair was wild, his forehead smeared with ash, with a thick overlay of saffron on it. He was wearing a red silk piece around him, and carried an axe on his shoulder. His unsteady gait, and his rolling eyes made it clear that he was up to some mischief. I began wondering and followed him quietly, without

his knowledge.'

Now, with an assumed self-pity but really to make us admire him more, Asan said with an air of resignation, 'Look at all the things that happen, denying a man a quiet night's rest! I am fated to go through this sort of thing. Unlike other fellows who wear khaki, draw their salary on the first of every month, and sleep in a four poster with their arm around their wives, I have to lose my sleep and go on errands like this in the middle of the night. I have to catch the thief, I have to stop the smuggler, I have to bring home the runaways, I have to trap the coconut-stealers, I have to cover myself with a cloth and spy on the big man going into the lane (to meet a prostitute). Everything falls in my lap, and I just accept it as my fate. The only way to look at it.

'Suddenly the priest took cover in the casuarina grove. I looked at the tamarind tank. What I saw then I shall never forget, it can never be erased from my mind. The ladder was slowly floating on the water, like the float in the tank of the Suchindram temple. Chellathayi was stretched out on it, with the lamp placed near her head. The lame boy who had carried the lamp was sitting behind her, eyes rolling in terror. Honestly, boys, it was the most pathetic sight I had ever seen.

'And how beautiful our princess was even in death! You could only see her face as she was completely covered up. Her face, and the bulge made by her wild guava-like breasts. Her hair blew in the wind, her dead hands unable to smooth it. There was no modesty left in her to make her want to cover her breasts. What a beauty she had been! There was a glow to her wherever she was, and she moved as gracefully as the temple peacock. A glance from her

would make any man go to pieces. The old man from Sakkadu took one look at her, and bewailed with tears in his eyes that he was too old for her. Coming or going, the men ate her up with their eyes. The slut, in a trice she hanged herself! Who will look at her now?

'I watched them carrying the ladder for a while, then I turned to the casuarina grove, and the priest was no longer there. Son of a bitch, I thought to myself, where did you go, and I walked along the southern bank of the tank, when I saw someone jump into the tank and swim towards the tamarind tree. I couldn't figure out what business anyone would have at the tree, at that hour, and I suddenly thought, it must be someone else going to hang himself from the tree. Then I heard the sound of the axe against the tree. The bastard was cutting the tree. What arrogance! Did he think that Asan was dead and gone? Hey, you have come to cut down the tree, have you? Did Madayadi Madan plant this tree? Or did the man who married your mother water it? The thoughts raced through my head, I could not control my anger, and I jumped into the tank.'

Asan took a cheroot from the pouch in his waist and lit it. He pursed his lips and blew out clouds of smoke, one after the other. He coughed a phony cough, cleared his throat again, and turned towards us.

'I caught his arm abruptly. He turned around and glared at me. I looked him straight in the eye, without blinking. Then he said, "Asan?"

"Yes, Damodara Asan," I said.

"Don't look for trouble, I can't tell you what I might do. Go away" he said.

'I raised my voice and said, "So, what will you do, fellow?"

"I have come to cut the tree down. If you try to stop me, I will take care of you first, and then go about my business," and he lifted the axe over his head.'

Asan paused for a while at this point. The silence weighed on our beating hearts. In a soft voice he resumed.

'I asked him, "How long have you been waiting to contest against me?"

"Why should I want to contest against you? Am I mad?"

"Not mad, but arrogant. Hey, don't you know there is no one who has got the better of Asan?"

"But it is you who wants to fight with me?"

"Why should I want to fight with you," I said.

"I have been planning all day to cut down this tree, and looking for an appropriate time to do so, and now you show up at the same moment. Was this the auspicious moment you were looking for also?" I countered.

'His face lit up when he realized that I was also there to cut down the tree. "What are you saying? What are you saying?" he asked me over and over again.

'I yelled at him, "Do I have to repeat myself? Have you gone deaf?"

"Really and truly, have you also come to cut down the tree, swear on your eyes?"

"No," I said ironically. "I have come to shave your head."

'He said, "Asan" loudly and fell at my feet.'

For a recital of the rest of the conversation, Asan modulated his voice. "Hey, aren't you the son of Kizhacheri Muthu?"

"Yes, yes!"

"Listen, fellow, do you know who got the lease of the Isanimangalam fields for your father from the Emden Iyer, do you know, do you know?"

"Yes, my father has told me."

"What did he tell you?"

"That you arranged the entire affair."

"You know, fellow, that only after he got the lease that your father started wearing red ear-rings?"

"Hmm."

"Wasn't it after getting the lease that your father began to have decent meals?"

"With despair now, 'Asan!'"

"Hey, listen, wasn't it after this that your father was able to change the thatched roof of your house and have tiles put in instead?"

"Don't remind me of all that, Asan, please don't."

"You dirty bastard! You trying to bite the arm that's protecting you? You trying to send up the Kadukothan Pichuva family in flames, is that what you were born for?"

"Pardon me, Asan, pardon me!" and the fellow fell at my feet.

Asan laughed to himself. He was feeling good.

'The fellow wouldn't let go of my feet easily. I kept asking him to get up, but he wouldn't. He kept imploring for my forgiveness, said he wouldn't get up if I didn't pardon him. I put my arm around him, and took him away gently from the tree, and sat down.

'Then Koplan asked me why I had come there to cut the tree down. I said, "Look, boy, take a careful look at this tree. Do you know what it is?"

"It is the tamarind tree," he said somewhat puzzled.

"You think it is an ordinary tamarind tree? Don't you know, you fool, it is vicious, it is pure poison?"

"You are right, Asan, you say it right."

"So you had the same idea, to cut down the tree?"

"Yes."

"To rid its pollution?"

"Yes."

"Did it come to you in a vision, or did God speak to you?"

"Came to me in a vision."

"During the festival, eh, as you were coming with the procession?"

"Yes."

"When?"

"Last week."

"It was Sangili who appeared before you, wasn't it?"

"Yes."

"What did he ask you to do?"

"To cut down the tree."

"Did he appear to anyone else, and give the same order?"

"Yes, to Kattai Subbiah also."

"I don't see him, where is he?"

"He became afraid."

"Became afraid?"

"Yes. I don't know why."

Asan abruptly changed tack, dropped his catechism, and began to talk gently to the priest. "Koplan, you are not an ordinary fellow, as I thought. You are pretty deep. The god himself appears to you in visions."

"That's what they all say."

'So you have a great reputation now?'

'The word goes from town to town. It is well-known in these parts that Sangili speaks to me.'

Asan put on his smoothest aspect. Talking in gentle phrases, he said, 'You are, after all, the grandson of Kadukothan Pichuva, and you were born to wealth. I am delighted that you are doing so well. Did you know that Pichuva and I were born on the same day?'

'I have heard so.'

'It is his memory that has brought me here just now. He said to me that his grandson was getting into a big difficulty, and I should go and save him. That is why I am here.'

'Why do you say so, Asan?'

'Koplan!'

'Asan!'

'Koplan, when I look at you I feel a great pity.

You are just a child, fellow, you are freshly drawn milk. So you were ordered to cut down the tree, and you immediately picked up your axe and came here. You think you will cut the tree down, and swim back to the bank of the tank, that is your idea, isn't it?'

'Yes. What then?'

'All right. That is what you think and that is what you were expected to think. Don't be frightened, I have been sent here to save you. Koplan, if you had cut down the tree, you would have vomited blood on the spot and would have died.'

'Asan, what are you saying?'

'Koplan, look here. This tree is evil, there is no doubt about it. All kinds of animals graze under it. I have spent a lot of time here. I know what the tree can do to even animals.'

'Asan, who knows better than you?'

'See now, a fierce god lives in this tree, and let

me tell you about it. It is good to good people, and bad to the bad ones. If you try to meddle with it, it will tear you to pieces. This evil tree is here just to destroy Kizhacheri and raze it to the ground. Chellathayi was a sacrifice to its anger. But anger often goes along with sympathy. The god would have torn you to bits. You have escaped with your life.'

Koplan wailed piteously. 'I am afraid, something is happening to me!'

'You fool, don't be afraid. I am here with you, and it doesn't say much for me if you were to panic in my presence. There is a way out of everything, and I'll tell you what to do.'

'Tell me, Asan, please tell me!'

'Look, we have got ourselves into an awkward position now. There is good in this tree, and there is evil. When two snakes are mating, they are wound so close that you have to be very gentle in separating them, like a swan separates milk from water. Now we can't go away from here, without doing something, because of fear of the tree, or it will destroy us sooner or later. We have got to be careful in what we do just now. We have to deface it in some fashion, like cutting off the nose of a bride in full bloom. Mutilate it, that is the only thing to do.'

'I'll do whatever you ask me to do.'

'I'll tell you what, Koplan. Cut down that branch from which that wretched woman hanged herself, and throw it away. That will serve the tree right, the abomination.'

In fifteen minutes he had cut down the branch. The two of us picked it up and threw it into the water. 'It is getting to be dawn. We can't stay here any longer without attracting attention,' I said to Koplan and jumped into the tank. He followed me, and we

clambered onto the bank. He went south and I took the northern road.

'If I had not had the presence of mind, the tamarind tree would have been cut down,' Asan finished his story. His face resumed its stony expressionlessness, and it seemed as if all bond between us had snapped.

But Pappu was not one to give up easily. He asked, 'Why was that fellow in such a frenzy to cut down the tree?' The same question had been nagging me too.

'Pappu, if you had been wanting to marry a girl, and had been thinking about it and planning day after day, how would you feel if a stranger showed up from somewhere, and took her away? Wouldn't you be in a frenzy yourself?'

'You mean Koplan had wanted to marry Chellathayi?'

'Yes, yes, he was her uncle's son, wasn't he? The wretched fellow just didn't have the luck. There was all that property also, and it needed a bright fellow to take care of it, and all that was now out of his reach. So he was frustrated. A man has somehow got to get rid of his anger and jealousy and disappointment, doesn't he? If you attack another person, you get taken to court. If you attack an animal, you have to settle matters with its owner. So Koplan picked on a voiceless tree which cannot complain, and took his axe to it.'

'Why didn't you tell us this in the beginning?' asked Thiruvazhi.

'All right, lad, what does it matter when I tell you,' Asan rolled up his shawl into a pillow, and stretched himself out.

'But one thing must be said, if Asan had not had

the right idea and the presence of mind that night, the tree would surely have been cut down,' said Joseph with great sincerity. Asan did not give any evidence that he appreciated this compliment. He had closed his eyes.

We took leave of Joseph and turned our steps towards our homes. I kept thinking over and over again about Asan's story.

The tamarind tree saved itself by losing just one branch. That was good. To be able to protect oneself even at the risk of losing something special is part of wisdom. Even lunacy is protective as a person may lose his mind but save his life. A lizard has a tail to lose, a woman her virtue, a man his principles, and god his many masks. Losing and receiving seem to be the main characteristics of life. Under pressure, in a trying time, one loses something, gains something, and maintains a balance. This has always seemed to be the purpose of language, religion and culture, to help one maintain a balance. This seems to be a law of nature.

The tamarind tree lost a branch. The shadow of the branch disappeared with the branch. The scar where the tree was cut healed in time. And as the years passed, the tree put out more branches. The branches spread and there was more shade under the tree in which more people took shelter from the heat. But the tree seemed indifferent to the comfort it was providing man and beast.

The branch that grew in place of the one that Koplan had cut down, however, never put out leaf, blossom or fruit. Asan bragged about helping save the tree for the benefit of the people. That was the truth as he knew it, but I am not at all sure whether it was good or bad that the tree survived. I knew all

the troubles that occurred later on but Asan did not. His knowledge of the tree was limited to his lifetime. When I think of all that happened afterwards, I sometimes think it might have been a good thing if the tree had been destroyed. It was, after all, responsible for all the strife and turmoil that occurred after Asan's time. But can one say so with certainty? Any excuse is good enough for man bent on self-destruction.

CHAPTER THREE

I still remember in detail my family leaving our ancestral village, lock, stock and barrel, and coming to settle down in this town, which was my mother's birthplace. We got off at the tamarind tree junction, which was then the heart of the town, and the centre of the shopping area. It never slept, there was a milling crowd day and night, and a sound like the humming of a million bees pervaded the streets. Here children clung to their elders' hands, and the latter felt a special satisfaction. The criss-crossing lights on store-fronts and shop-roofs looked like motionless and suspended lightning. I wondered, have I really left that village where the occasional motor car was a major excitement to come to this incredible town? I did not then know of course that one day I would see the same place looking bleak like a cremation ground, enveloped in gloom.

Asan's tales about the tamarind tree made me wonder how the tank and island were transformed into the tamarind tree junction as I saw it now. A lone tree and a dank tank—how could they have developed into an urban show-piece? As all this change took place in Asan's time, I was anxious to hear the story from him. But trying to get anything out of Asan was always a Herculean effort. He was like a flash flood, went his own uncharted way, amenable only when he felt like being amenable. There was another problem also. He seemed to have become indifferent to the tamarind tree, and weary of talking about it. This was one of his peculiar traits.

He would be talking enthusiastically about something, and midway would lose interest in it. He would suddenly drop it and move on to something else. I could not understand the singular working of his mind. Perhaps he had become tired of his obsession with the tamarind tree. Who knows? He was the quintessence of every eccentric, unconventional and off beat trait that man has been known to possess. Also, I lost touch with Asan as I had to do some travelling in my job, which reduced the opportunities of meeting him.

On one of my trips I got into a messy love affair (was it really love?), disgraced myself thoroughly, lost my job, and came back to my house with a hangdog look. All day I stayed house-bound, because I had become the laughing-stock of the town, and jeering laughter greeted me if I so much as peered out the window. I learnt to live with it.

But I am talking at random, one gets a perverse pleasure from talking about oneself. Let us see. Those days I used to stay in the house until about seven-thirty in the evening. My friends had scattered in different directions, dragged all over the country by the compulsions of job seeking, so I had nothing to do all day long. When it was sufficiently dark and faces could not be easily recognized, I would drape a scarf around my neck, and sally forth towards the west, the cool breeze gently caressing my face. Joseph's laundry about a mile away on Asaripallam road was my destination, and I would go there and sit down. It was there that we last met Damodara Asan, and heard the most wonderful stories. He had cultivated storytelling into an art but my fickle mind cannot, unfortunately, remember many of the stories.

The clutter of rubbish that the exigencies of survival filled my head with had obviously displaced the stories.

Even so, the last story he told us is still fresh in my memory.

Not one of his best stories but it stays in my mind because it told of how the tamarind tree tank was transformed into the tamarind tree junction.

I indeed remember well. That day Asan was sitting cross-legged on the bench outside Joseph's laundry. He had his 'serious' expression on. (Asan had a mobile face which we would anxiously study to gauge his moods.) He was listlessly prodding the dead embers that had fallen on the ground with his stick. I was perched precariously on a tiny stool near the entrance to the shop. Joseph was ironing clothes on the long table. Handsome dark face. Beautiful white teeth. Blue lips. Uncrushed shirt from which he constantly kept blowing away the cinders from the glowing iron. Joseph was a committed Socialist then, and a photograph of Achyut Patwardhan had pride of place in his shop.

Joseph was holding forth on various subjects, for instance, his revolutionary plan for making the British rulers quit the country in twelve hours. Asan's face was becoming grim. He belonged to the school which believed that only the white people knew how to rule, and they should continue to rule the country. This was one of his firmest convictions. He was also aggravated that a nobody should go on and on in a juvenile fashion in his presence. As soon as an opportunity presented itself, he deftly took the floor away from Joseph, started talking in his own magisterial fashion. Mainly he recalled stories about

the kings of yore. He paid elaborate tributes to their great qualities. When he came to Maharaja Pooram Thirunal, he extolled the Maharaja's many talents, all-round versatility, his fearlessness, and his generous caring for his subjects as though they were his children. Joseph could not stand this panegyric for too long. He burst out: 'Look here, Asan, in a few years your royal family will have to learn shorthand and typewriting to be able to keep body and soul together!'

Asan was infuriated. He yelled: 'Joseph, what do you know about anything? You talk out of ignorance. What do you know about the royal family, you upstart, to have the boldness to hold forth like this?' In turn, Joseph also shouted, but Asan was not to be contained that easily.

'Listen, fellow, this town used to be no better than a graveyard. Daily four or five people were hanged here. I ask you, what did this town have to show for itself then? You couldn't go near the tank because of the stench. Grass and weeds grew to a man's height here. Jackals used to howl in this town during the day. There was no one to question it if someone was murdered in broad daylight. This place where you now have your shop, no one could come here in those days without attracting snakes. And one day the great Pooram Thirunal looked in this direction, and in a trice the place was transformed into a fairyland.'

At this point I managed rather smartly to pacify Joseph and stop him from saying anything else that would infuriate Asan, as it was obvious that Asan was preparing to tell a story about the tamarind tree tank. Asan however remained very stern and would

not look at either of us. It took a cup of tea, a roll of paan leaves, nuts and a bolt of tobacco to soothe him. After Joseph and I requested him over and over again, he cleared his throat and started on his narrative.

He began by saying that Maharaja Pooram Thirunal's rule was the most glorious period in the history of the state. The Maharaja was not only a great Sanskrit scholar but an expert in all aspects of philosophy and astrology. He was devoted to his subjects. He was gentle by nature. 'He had the innocence of a child,' said Asan, and suddenly burst out laughing, and could not control it. His body continued to shake with laughter.

Joseph was getting irritated. 'Why don't you tell us what makes you laugh like this?'

Asan tried to compose himself, said, 'There was a story about him in those days, but I don't know if it was really true,' and burst out laughing again.

I said, 'If you tell us the story, we can also laugh with you.'

'Anyone who said the Maharaja was without guile would also tell this story,' said Asan.

Maharaja Pooram Thirunal went to see a football match once. The game had just begun to be played in the state, and the Maharaja had never seen it before. After watching the play for a few minutes, the Maharaja started shedding copious tears, and the courtiers and officials around him were startled out of their wits as they could not understand what was wrong. None dared ask him either, but finally the Maharaja's private secretary, Sthanunatha Iyer, approached him with folded arms, and waited to be told what had upset the Maharaja. The Maharaja

Football
match

said, 'Sthanu, have things come to such a pass in our state? It is pitiful. There are ten or twelve people out there, contending for one ball. Can't they be given a ball each and sent away?' The Maharaja shed tears again.

Asan did not tell us whether the game continued, and the Maharaja soothed. I assumed that all those who were playing that day got a football each. Asan continued.

In those days the Maharaja used to come to Kanyakumari twice a year for a sea-bath. Those were times when the people's loyalty to the Maharaja was absolute. They could not decide whether the king was god or god the king. The king's visit was the only talk of the town. The preparations for his visit would start six months before the visit was actually due. And as soon as the Maharaja had come and gone, the preparations for his next visit would start. This was Asan's picturesque way of telling us that right round the year, the town was always preparing for the Maharaja's visit. Roads would be mended. As the Maharaja had a habit of immersing himself in water while bathing, new tanks would be dug out wherever he stayed. Fresh water would be fed into existing tanks. On the day of the Maharaja's visit, sweets would be distributed to school-children, and poor children given new clothes.

It was a sight for the gods to see: the Maharaja arriving in his golden chariot, drawn by six horses. The dewan (prime minister) would follow him in a silver chariot drawn by four horses. All eyes would be on the Maharaja, while presumably the dewan would be observing the crowds. The Maharaja would greet the crowds with hands folded in humility,

constantly turning to either side of the road, and nodding his head. Till he went past the crowds, he would keep his hands folded and nod his head repeatedly. After he moved on people would fight with one another, claiming that he had looked at them alone.

In those days, the lower part of the town faced east from the town. The main road ran about two miles east of the tamarind tank. The wild mid-July winds began to blow, raising a storm of dust to the height of a man. The garbage from the ground began to swirl up, taking various shapes, and dissolving within a few seconds. That year the wind began to show what it was capable of.

Maharaja Pooram Thirunal had arrived the previous night and stayed in the Vadasseri palace. The fireworks started around four in the morning with the igniting of gunpowder. A multitude of people gathered from Vadasseri to Ithamozhi, children, young people, old men and women. The streets seemed to be strewn with silk and gold—no one would have believed there was so much finery and ornament if he had been told so at any other time. People from out-of-town also started pouring in now, adding to the gaiety of the occasion. A look of happy anticipation was in the eyes of every beholder. As the regal procession approached Minakshipuram, the crowds watched it breathlessly. Now the Maharaja was in front of the Vadivamman temple. The temple bell rang. The king stood up in his chariot, his hands folded, religious fervour filling his eyes.

Suddenly a wild wind blew, bringing with it a noxious odour. People were at first only mildly aware

of it, but soon the stench could not be ignored, faces twisted in repulsion. The wind blew the women's saris against their faces, and the buntings put up in the shops bit the ground. No, no one could ignore the smell now. It was as if all the fish in the sea had been cast ashore and were decaying. The army of officials did their best to save the situation. They burnt scented sticks in their bales. They lit fires and fed them with camphor. But nothing could prevent the stench from assailing the senses of the assembled myriad.

Sthanunatha Iyer descended from his copper chariot, and gave his staff a tongue lashing, but who can stop the wind with his hand? The Maharaja wanted, until the very end, to behave as if he had not noticed anything untoward, and kept a forced smile on his face, beaming at the crowd. But soon enough he gave up. His senses were very delicate and he was not accustomed to bad smells, especially of such a magnitude. When the ordinary people could not bear the smell, how could he, the descendant of kings?

The smile deserted his face which turned black and shaped itself into a fierce grimace. He looked as if the bad smell had its origin in his face. It was all very unfortunate. He had started out to good omens, arrangements had been made for two Brahmins to walk in front of him as he left the palace. The Brahmins got their gifts and were having a massive meal in the alms-house while the Maharaja was struggling for breath. Oh, it was most unfortunate. The Maharaja ordered the chariot forward fast. The horses flew. Due to arrive at the Suchindram palace at nine in the evening, the Maharaja and his retinue got there by five, hours before time.

At midnight, Mutham Perumal, the district head, sat on the steps of the Suchindram palace, holding his head in his hands. His future was indeed bleak, as everybody suspected. He had hoped to fall at the feet of the Maharaja when he finished his dinner, and had come post-haste to Suchindram, but he could meet only Sthanunatha Iyer. Mutham Perumal held his hands in a firm grip, and implored, 'Save me!' The general belief was that Sthanunatha Iyer had much clout with the Maharaja. The Maharaja had a roving eye, and Sthanunatha Iyer's wife was, as they say, pretty as a picture.

The Maharaja had finished his dinner, and was relaxing on a swing, with his upper cloth carelessly fallen from his shoulder, and moving the swing gently with his toes.

Sthanunatha Iyer came into the room, with Mutham Perumal cowering behind him, trying to hide at least half his body behind Iyer's. The Maharaja looked at Mutham Perumal expressionlessly, who wrapped his towel around his waist and prostrated at the Maharaja's feet, with his feet, his stomach and his forehead flat against the ground. When he rose the Maharaja's feet as well as his face were wet with his tears, said Asan as if he had been present on the occasion. He tried to speak but was tongue-tied, and his mouth was dry. He perspired so much that he looked as if he had been bathing in the tank with his clothes on.

Sthanunatha Iyer tried to intercede on his behalf, and began, 'Mutham Perumal says that out of grave carelessness . . . ' but the Maharaja cut him short.

'Sthanu,' he said, 'you don't have to say

anything, just listen to me. The rose has a fragrance and the jasmine another. I know there are different kinds of smells, I thought I had experienced them all. I thought all bad smell was alike, until today. Cloistered in my palace, how would I know about the stench in the streets? My palace may smell good, but does that mean my state also smells good. Please thank this official on my behalf for gathering together in one place every kind of bad smell.' And he laughed loudly, but in uncontrollable anger.

Both left the room. Neither could determine whether the Maharaja's words were favourable or unfavourable. They knew next morning when Mutham Perumal was summarily dismissed.

Pity poor Mutham Perumal! He had done his best, he had hardly slept for three months, and he had lost ten pounds in weight. All the same he lost his job, because of the mischievous vagaries of nature, and the tamarind tank was the villain. When fresh water was let into all the tanks, somehow the tamarind tank had been overlooked. No one thought about it in connection with the Maharaja's visit, probably because it was not near the main road. But a tank is a tank and water is water, and covered deep with slime on its bed, full of slush to its bottom, and the stools of the people dotting its banks, the tamarind tree had given forth the odour which the wild wind carried directly to the Maharaja. The dirty tank caused the Maharaja himself to withdraw precipitately from his august procession, and deprived poor Mutham Perumal of his job.

The next day the quick decision the Maharaja had made was on everybody's lips. Apparently he came to a firm conclusion while worshipping in the

Kanyakumari temple that, when returning to his capital, he would again take the tamarind tank route. And he was due to return to the capital just seven days later. Barely a week!

Orders from the local administration flew in every direction. An Indian engineer, working with a British engineer, estimated the cost at a hundred and fifty thousand rupees. God knows how they managed to find the multitude of workers to work on the crash project. Officials cast around all over the state to find able-bodied workers, and rounded up thousands of men and women. Construction work in a radius of fifty miles was halted by an official order. Loaded wagons were parked on the banks of the tank, and the weekly market was cancelled for two weeks.

They cut a narrow canal and directed the water from the tamarind tank to the Therekalputhur channel. In a day the tamarind tank merged with the Indian Ocean. Around where the tank had been they burned man-high piles of sandalwood, said Asan.

There was in those days a tall cliff four miles south of the tank standing between two hills. It was really the aggregation of red mud, that had piled up over the centuries, and it stood like a giant ant-hill. Thousands of labourers hacked at it and the mud was scooped into baskets, and relayed through a chain of workers who filled the waiting carts with it, said Asan who had been watching the proceedings, perched on a tree. The mud was thrown into the now dry tamarind tank, the ant-hill was razed to the ground, and there was no trace of the tank. Filling the tank had taken just two days. In the next four days, they laid a road which went in a straight line from Vadasserri to Kottar Road. The new road passed in

front of the tamarind tree. In all this frantic activity, the tamarind tree stood untouched. When the Maharaja came on the return visit, his golden chariot went past the tamarind tree. The streets were strewn with flowers. It was a heavenly sight. 'If the Maharaja hadn't paid that visit, the place would have remained the same. If that new road hadn't been laid, would this town have grown?' asked Asan rhetorically. 'Only his visit put life into this town.'

Neither Joseph nor I was overly impressed by this story of Asan. It seemed to us that he was straining to make his point. I thought that whether the Maharaja had or had not come, progress would certainly have come to the town in due time. But I didn't say so as I did not want to get Asan started all over again. Probably, he sensed that his story had not been received as well as usual, and he got up without saying a word, tucked up his veshti and wound it around his waist, underwear showing clearly, and disappeared into the dark of the night.

That was the last time I saw Asan, as I went away to another town where I had been given a job. When I returned two years later—to get married, by the way—I learnt that Asan had left the town many months earlier. One day, as I was sitting with Joseph in his laundry, talking of this and that, he gave me startling information. It would seem that Asan accompanied a rich man to Kadirgaman in Sri Lanka for the annual festival. He never returned. Apparently he promised a Sinhalese gentleman to convert metal into gold through alchemy, and mulcted him of a sizeable sum, for which he was put in jail. That was the first version. They then heard that he had died of cholera by the seashore, in his last

minutes declaring loudly to those around him that there is no god. His mistress from Sandanpudur would show up every now and again, go through some routine weeping, and would go back after collecting some cash for expenses, said Joseph. She also claimed to Joseph to have the skin of the tiger that Asan had personally shot. It was hard for me to believe that someone like Damodara Asan could have died so casually. I had no doubt that as long as we remembered his stories, and those we have told them to remembered them, Asan was still alive in some fashion.

I learnt afterwards from several sources how the shopping street in front of the tamarind tree developed, and how the town grew in the west. As time passed, loaded carts began using the road in front of the tamarind tree day and night. Goods from the Kottar godowns were carried back and forth on the road on their way to other towns. The tree stood on a mound which was an ideal playground for the small boys who played kabaddi and gulli-danda there. The place also became the parking ground at nights for the passenger buffalo carts. When buses started operating, the mound was converted into a bus stand. Shops started springing up around the bus stand, as did a couple of restaurants. In the course of time the area became a junction. Though there were many tamarind trees in the town, and several junctions too, when one said tamarind tree, the reference was always to this tamarind tree, and junction always meant this junction. Both were *sui generis*.

The road in front of the tamarind tree was cemented. As the movement of carts and buses

increased, their stands were moved elsewhere. The casuarina grove close to the tamarind tree was converted into a town park. The municipality now prepared a plan for developing fine shopping streets around the tree. They divided the mound into lots which they leased out to individuals. Nilakantan Potti from Udipi started the first business. He built a two-storey building and set up a restaurant in it. In the beginning he had to sink nearly a hundred thousand rupees in it, but within ten years he got back his capital. He bought twenty acres of very fertile wet land close by. He also had ten or fifteen taxis cruising in the town. He mopped up vacant lots and houses wherever he could get his hands on them. When in old age he decided to return to his native place, he had an offer of twenty thousand rupees more than what he had paid for his property on the mound.

Shops came up next to Potti's restaurant along the front row, a money-changer, a barber-shop, a wholesale dealer of snuff. Directly in front of the tamarind tree stood Abdul Khader's famous stationery shop. Adjacent to it was the huge air-conditioned cinema. Electric lines reached the top of the tamarind tree, criss-crossed by telephone wires.

People began to cluster around the tamarind tree junction from five in the morning. An hour spent here was the equivalent of spending ten years in the town. One could experience the highs and lows of the town, its splendour and squalor, right at this spot. Innumerable colonies of houses came up behind the tamarind tree, yet newcomers to the town had housing problems.

The town had changed unrecognizably, but not

the tamarind tree. Posters were pasted on its trunk, and cinema notices were hung from its branches. Flags of all parties fluttered from its limbs. The tree put up with all this, indifferent, unmoved and unchanging. Many did not even remember the tree was there, though they repeated its name all the time.

When I came to this town at the age of eleven, it was at the tamarind tree junction that I got off and stepped on this soil for the first time. I still remember the view I had, standing on the side of the road. How beautiful the tamarind tree looked, as if it had tied in a single string hundreds of green umbrellas and was floating them downwards! And as far as the eye could see, rows and rows of lights that gleamed in regular and irregular formations, magnificent shopping streets, the milling crowds, the vehicles that trailed one another—when I remember all this, I still hear the clamour of the crowds, and the wind roaring through the tamarind tree.

One could not hope to see such attractive and varied shops anywhere else. From salt to camphor, from tiger's milk to elephant's tusk, everything the heart desired was available. One could fix a wedding in the evening, and celebrate it in the morning, thanks to these shops which had everything, and where money rolled in hundreds of thousands in the cash boxes.

Where are those shops now, and where are the captivating lights? Why are the shops dark, and filled with spiders and cobwebs? Why has the Goddess of Ill Intent chosen to dance here? After all, these shops had not been here for centuries, but they have gone to rack and ruin in ten years. I could not believe what had happened, neither could I disbelieve it. One can

perhaps dismiss Damodara Asan's stories as fiction, made up by him, one could even dismiss what I had heard as just lies. But how can I not believe what I have seen with my own eyes? It is going to be difficult to describe the sequence of events. It is no pleasure either to analyse the course of the destruction that occurred here. But having begun, I must continue, tell all.

CHAPTER FOUR

What used to be a casuarina grove to the south of the tamarind tank was now a full-fledged modern garden. Even dullards and weak-sighted persons could see in it what can be accomplished by the whirligig of time, it was so spectacular.

Once it was a dark and gloomy grove, spitting out the wind venomously, as if it were a pair of bellows. The desolation in it was so complete that wayfarers who came near it would walk away quickly in fear and panic. But for Damodara Asan the casuarina grove was the nearest thing to paradise. To be the only subject of the lonely and awesome despot that the grove was, to spend his time there, gave Asan the highest pleasure.

Imagine the scene. The tamarind tank. The mound like an elephant's back in its middle. The tamarind tree, standing on the mound, swaying and rustling in the wild wind. The green field that stretched as far as the eye could see. The gay dance of the casuarinas in the grove to the west of the tank. At a distance various beautiful objects, scattered, but riddles, not recognizable. The scene might have given rise to a perverse pleasure in Asan. After all, he had always preferred the fierce and frightening Kali to the gentle goddess in the Kanyakumari temple. He would inhale deeply the rainbow-hued petrol on the street, and exclaim, 'What fragrance!' He would add, 'Everybody repeats the same thing, that flowers smell good, sandal smells good. Have they ever smelt the

smell that rises from the hot red dust when the rain begins to fall on it?' And he would go into ecstasy remembering that smell. 'Only the snake and I have a sense of smell,' he would say. It was not surprising at all that the casuarina grove dragged Asan to it like a magnet. It was the unusual and the grotesque that really interested him.

If Asan had been alive today, he would never have stepped into the new park, filled as it was with all manner of fancy new trees and plants, and lit by tube-lights which gave out a moon-like glow. In fact, if he had run into the municipal commissioner, he would have subjected him to the choicest abuse, and I would not have been surprised at all.

In those days, when Damodara Asan spoke about the casuarina grove, he sounded as happy as a child sucking a sweet. 'What cool darkness was there!' he would exclaim. Both the coolness and the darkness were important. After a big meal he would usually go to the grove to rest. 'And I tell you, when I had a wedding feast with eighteen kinds of dishes, the grove would beckon to my feet. When I got there and lay down, I would be lost to the world. Only when I got up again I would know the day and the date, and that too by asking somebody.' An exaggeration in his usual style, but a worthy tribute to the casuarina grove.

Someone would say that the wind blew wildly in the grove. 'Don't call it "wind", you dolt, call it "a gentle breeze."' (This was as close to a poetic expression as Asan ever got to.) 'Ah, you should have experienced that breeze. It felt like the touch of white silk on the body, as if someone was showering you with baskets of jasmine.' Carried away by his own

retrospective enthusiasm, he would proceed to pile exaggeration upon exaggeration about the manifold merits of the casuarina grove. We did learn a great deal about the grove from him, for instance, about how it would trap even the midday sun in its dense foliage, and make day look like night.

More about the grove. It was a fully grown grove even when he was young, said Asan. He did not know whether the trees grew close to one another as a result of nature or through the efforts of man, but there it was. If you questioned him persistently, he would have some sort of an answer—when did he ever not have one?—and would say, 'How does all that concern us now? A great place for playing cards,' and bluff his way through. That the casuarina grove was—a place of solace for fifty years. It was where the young men learnt the facts of life. They learnt to play cards there, to drink, to swallow opium. They learnt about sex and studied sex manuals and commentaries on them. And about how to have venereal diseases cured. And heard stories about famous prostitutes. Each single casuarina tree in the grove could bear mute witness to the antics of man there, and must have been perturbed by the perversity of the human being. If it could feel.

The boys who herded the cattle in the morning to the tamarind tree tank would let them wallow in the water while they played wildly in the casuarina grove, said Asan. Their favourite pastime was to play the monkey game, which involved jumping from tree to tree, holding on to the branches until their soft palms got completely calloused. Jumping from tree to tree, over a period of time the boys really felt they had established a different mode of movement. When

they jumped with their eyes closed there were always branches of the trees to support them wherever they landed, said Damodara Asan, master of the overstatement.

When they tired of playing monkey, the boys would strip themselves and wrestle on the dusty ground. Modesty is only in the eyes of the beholder. The location, their relationship with one another, made them cast modesty to the winds. They shouted obscenities at one another, their imagination gave rise to new obscenities, and they revelled in it. Now and again teachers from their own crowd, meaning somewhat older boys, taught them about the birds and the bees, and dispelled their general ignorance about such matters. Many young people had the facts of life unravelled to them in the casuarina grove. There was an atmosphere of serenity about the grove which was conducive to the transmission of knowledge and the exchange of information. One might even say that when the casuarina grove was demolished, the peace that still pervaded our town disappeared.

Asan, who gave us so much picturesque information about the casuarina grove did not live to see the transformation—or transmogrification, as some would have it—of the grove into a park. But I was a witness. I remember, when I was in college, watching the trees being felled one after the other. It is a vivid memory. My closest friend, Chakrapani Rao, insisted on taking me to see the spectacle. The axes fell on the base of the trees, and the trees fell, one after the other, giving one final leap as the branches touched the ground. The grove looked like Kurukshetra, strewn with corpses, after the war was over, in the *Mahabharat*. The individual trees looked

like so many new widows, shorn of their hair. The sight fascinated me, but also disturbed me a great deal.

The casuarina grove was converted into a park only after Damodara Asan's time. First, the tamarind tree junction came up, after the tamarind tank disappeared. Shops developed in the junction, and a bus stand was set up in the southern corner. The junction was full of the roaring of vehicles, crowds milled around there, and friendly pandemonium reigned. It was all so modern, now! And to have a casuarina grove blowing in the near distance struck many people as absurd—as absurd as an old-fashioned head-ornament on a college girl. It was now that many developed a sense of aesthetics, and began to tell themselves and one another, 'Ah, if only the casuarina grove were not there!'

The casuarina grove had become a mote in the eyes of many people indeed, but the credit for removing the mote belongs rightly to Mr F.X. Fernandez, Municipal Chairman. At a meeting held to celebrate his election, he declared that his first task would be to eliminate the casuarina grove, and set up a beautiful, modern park there with all amenities. This declaration was received with vociferous acclaim by his audience. He went on to say that this would be the first of the measures he would be taking to modernize our town. More applause.

He was a man of his word and an activist par excellence. Under his able guidance, the grove was destroyed, the park came up, and he was enshrined in the hearts of the people.

As the grove was being demolished, I frequently thought of Damodara Asan. I remembered his pride in saving the tamarind tree from being felled by

Koplan, by using ingenuity and presence of mind. He considered it his greatest accomplishment in life. How would he have felt now if he saw the casuarina trees falling down one by one? This was no single man's order, as it might have been in the old days. It was the act of the head of a democratic government, democratically elected. Each one of us might have had our own ideas about the grove, but who could have opposed whom? But if Asan had been alive—ignoring the changes that time brings—would he not have jumped into the fray? Tucking his veshti between his legs, and spoiling for a fight? But would Asan's big talk, exaggerations and loud challenges have met with any kind of response today? If one of the young leaders said to Asan, 'All right, Asan, if you don't like the park, you have every right to run for election, win it, destroy the park and put the grove back in place . . .' what could Asan have done? He would have been tongue-tied. His former bravado would not have helped, and even if he had tried to argue, he would have been seen only as an old fool with outmoded ideas. It didn't matter how wise Asan might have been, he could never have understood the language of these young men. He would have realized one thing, that the days laundryman Joseph had predicted were already here, no doubt about it. All Asan could have done now was to throw a couple of handfuls of dirt at whoever it was, and go away cursing. It was a good thing he did not live to see those happenings.

But you cannot say that with Asan's leaving the scene there were no others who felt the same way. I remember . . . as the trees were being cut down, a bewildered old Nadar asked a young man who was

standing next to him, 'Young man, why are they cutting down these trees?' I was standing by.

'They are going to plant new plants here,' said the youth.

'What are they going to do that for?' asked the old man in amazement.

'To get breeze.'

'Will the plants give more breeze than the trees?' asked the old man.

The young man corrected himself, 'For the attractiveness.'

'Only the plants will be attractive?'

'Hmm.'

'Won't the plant grow into a tree?'

The young man lost his patience, and spat out, 'They will only plant those plants which won't grow up to be trees. If they grow too much, they will cut the excess down.'

'They will, eh?'

'Yes.'

'What a mad lot!' the old man exclaimed, and used some choice obscenities about the authorities. His aggravation was very obvious from the clear way in which he enunciated his words, and the disgust he brought to them. His face reflected the thought that the world was going to the dogs, and his own days were coming to an end, and actually there was a touch of happiness on his face at these thoughts. In his questions and the clarity of his expression I saw only Damodara Asan's image. The face was the Nadar's but the voice was that of Damodara Asan.

The low murmurs of the disgruntled were heard until the end. The world was not going to stop to pay any attention to these murmurs. Too many other

things were brewing in the recesses of time, too many other revolutions which made such murmurs pale into insignificance. The revolutionary who was behind the times was already the butt of ridicule of the newcomers. But, look, as the boy feeds the string to the air, and the kite flies higher and higher, one can get some satisfaction from the thought that it is its tail that helps the kite to stay up.

The sun shone brightly on where the casuarina grove used to be. The gloom that pervaded the grove had disappeared. One's eyes dazzled. It was as if a thousand canopies had been torn down, and the sun flowed down in a silvery light, blinding one's eyes.

The work was proceeding vigorously, and hundreds of men and women were labouring to build the park. The young man from Thanjavur, who had studied gardening abroad, had taken charge. His two year contract cost our penurious municipality an eye and a tooth, but he had been highly recommended, and was said to have rejected an offer from Italy to be able to help us out. He supervised every activity. First they levelled the ground, spread clayish soil on it, and planted grass. Beds were laid, as well as pathways. Along the pathways, short shrubs were planted. Other plants were trained on metal lattices. Rare plants and vines were imported from abroad. Our own flowering plants like rose and the varieties of jasmine found no place in the park. Flowering plants were obviously banished from the garden.

An ornamental tank was created in the centre of the park. It was shaped like nothing on earth. Presumably, its novelty was its only beauty. Rubber ducks, more attractive than real ones, floated on the surface. The tank also served as a fish pond. The scum was cleared every day, and there was an

attendant on hand who made sure that no one spat into the tank. The fish were fed from tins morning and evening.

A small zoo came up in one corner of the park. Elephant, bear, deer, peacocks were displayed there. Clean, exact, all looking fresh. The young man from Thanjavur, our garden specialist, with thick glasses in a thick frame, plastered-down hair, and long white trousers, was all over the place looking into a thick leather-bound volume for advice. He constantly gave instructions and servants with huge shears were cutting and snipping wherever he pointed. He took a variety of stances: looking closely at one plant, peering at another from a distance, facing one full front; he adopted a wide variety of attitudes, now kneeling on one knee, now screwing his eyes, always looking into his leather-bound book, and giving instructions to the bearers of the shears. Careful supervision was required all the time. A branch might grow where he did not want it, a deer might grow too fat, a duck may preen like a peacock, anything untoward could happen. It could all spoil the basic plan for a beautiful park.

The young man from Thanjavur gave of his best to the park. Flowers bloomed exactly where he ordered they should. Vines grew in curls as he wanted them to. In the beginning visitors to the park who just wanted to sit down and chat with one another were distracted by the radio that had been set up, but as time went on they learnt to think of it as an essential background for their chit-chat. The crowds were such that there was not enough room for everybody to sit on the grass, the chairs and benches being already occupied. Men and women came together, but one rarely saw lovers. On the

other hand the newly-weds started coming within a week of their getting married. They knew that life was not going to be as relaxed always as it was now, and the park was one of the first places to visit on their list.

*the newly-weds
each other's company*

It was really something to see these newly-weds in the park. Sitting on the grass, she cupped her face in her left hand, the soles of her feet were directed towards the stars. She would smile at her husband-lover every now and again and blush, her eyes lowered, laugh without reason; as I say their dalliance was really something to see. Occasionally the woman would rest her head on her stretched-out arm as if she was tired, and look up at her husband, screwing her love-laden eyes, enchanting anyone who might be looking on with her feminine wiles. Where did she learn the bewitching gestures and movements that she was using now from? The top of her sari, draped over her shoulder, kept dropping down every now and again, and she kept adjusting it—a really sensuous act. All around, young boys and girls walked back and forth, selling groundnuts, peanuts and other kinds of snacks. Women coquettishly lit the cigarettes which their men were holding in their mouths. Through transparent blouses one could see the brassière strings against the shoulders and broad backs which drew one's attention compulsively. The sly, sideward glances that some of the women flashed wreaked havoc in one's heart.

The benches around the ornamental pond were not reserved for pensioners, but the older men had, over a period of time, assumed a right of possession over them. Faded umbrellas and walking-sticks

would keep slipping down from the benches, and the entire area, the benches, the plants, the tube lights, and even the pond, seemed to have taken on an air of extreme age. False teeth would flash disgustingly when one of them smiled. These old folk constantly complained about the weather and would have liked to outlaw the rain and the wind, the breeze and the showers, the heat and the cold. They looked as if they would start sneezing if the weather report announced rain along the coast. They muttered angrily as they had to dodge the oncoming traffic with blaring horns. They acted as if everything was conspiring to make them miserable, and looked at one with piteous expressions. The end of the world was coming, they told one another, while inspecting keenly the fashionable young women who passed through the park, and muttered about their bold and shameless ways. They covered their noses with their thin upper cloths as cars and lorries lumbered past, raising clouds of dust. When the dust settled down they sniffed snuff with every sign of irritation. They reminisced to one another about how good life used to be, and how it had now gone to the dogs. If one of their letters to the editor of the local English newspaper got published, they debated vigorously about the views expressed.

They never failed to ask after one another's health when they met in the evenings. They compared and discussed their diets, with expressions of envy or self-satisfaction. If God could not give equal satisfaction, he should at least spread the misery around evenly, seemed to be their philosophy. How glorious it would have been if they were young again with all the knowledge gained from age, was

another of their day-dreams. They bragged about meagre victories in order to forget about massive failures, but none of them was fooled, and shamefaced looks went around. They laughed tentatively until an oncoming cough stopped them. They frequently repeated their old joke that one who had neither diabetes nor blood pressure would be permitted to sit on the benches around the pond. They were willing to forgive God for all his iniquities if only he would ordain sudden deaths for them. When one of them dropped down dead suddenly, they prayed that the same good fortune should befall them also. And they prayed hard.

In one corner of the park there was a memorial to Gandhiji, engraved with some of his sayings. A municipal servant, clad in khaki hand-spun cloth stood guard to make sure nobody went up the monument with footwear on, and to evict people who tried to smoke sitting under it.

There was heated discussion and elaborate criticism of Tamil and English movies among those sitting on the grass. A group of students, deeply perturbed by the evening news that a famous Tamil actress had had a miscarriage, had sent a pre-paid telegram for the latest information on her condition, and one of them had been dispatched to the telegraph office to wait for the reply. The others waited impatiently for his return, listless in the meantime. An older student tried to calm them down, thereby calming himself down, by talking about all the advances in modern medicine. A few days earlier she had acted very realistically in a child-birth scene, and they thought that that was what must have brought on the attack. Momentarily at least an excess of

religious fervour came over them, and they told each other comforting platitudes like, 'God always puts to trial those who have real faith in him', and 'These are bad times for good people'. Their drawn faces seemed indeed to suggest that they were really praying fervently for the actress' haemorrhage to cease.

On another section of the grass, politics was being discussed loudly by people wearing ochre-coloured, hand-spun jibbabs, hand-spun veshtis with dirt-coloured borders, and upper cloths of ungainly green. Now and again the discussion became really fierce with contending parties trying to outshout one another. They made frightening gestures with their heads and hands, contorted their faces, their eyes red and watering, and looked like cats in heat in their efforts to put one another down. Obviously they believed that the higher the decibel count, the stronger the argument, and were totally impervious to the fact that they were merely spouting the morning's headlines. One of them waved away an old woman trying to sell nuts by saying he had a limited budget, and she went away quietly.

The evening papers were selling briskly in the park. In words and pictures the latest disasters and catastrophes were featured on the front pages. New in big letters on the front page was a headline about runaway wives which made some wonder whether it would be wise to go back home expecting to see their wives there. Some had total recall for the news as it appeared in the paper, and were held in high esteem by friends who admired their phonographic recitals. To continue to be considered repositories of the highest wisdom, they haunted the free reading

rooms, mopping up as much news as they could. They did not have the leisure to look at the blackbirds, to watch the river flow gently, or to pick shells on the seashore.

A professor strolled into the park. Jibbah with long sleeves almost hiding the fingers, folded upper cloth coming down to the knees, erect stride, an expression of wisdom beyond his years on his face, eyes that took in everything. A group of smoking students rose as one man on seeing him, and tried to hide their cigarettes behind their backs, dribbling the smoke already in their mouths as inconspicuously as possible. They greeted him, 'Good evening, sir.' The professor's face brightened. Half turning towards them like an electric fan, he said, 'Sitting on the grass, are you?' 'Yes, sir,' replied the students. 'Fine breeze, isn't it?' said the professor, and they assented in unison. A nervous thought flickered among them, that he might ask them to repeat a Tamil verse he had taught them. He looked as if he had had the same thought, but changed his mind, said 'Fine, fine. Do sit down,' and moved on, obviously unable to decide which verse to ask for from the many he could remember immediately.

Protest processions were going along the street, shouting hoarsely, 'Down, Down!' The processionists looked like they had had a mass blood-letting, and were now on their way to redeem a vow. The people on the grass rushed to the roadside to have a good view. The procession moved towards vacant spots, and the people also tried to find ringside perches. This was the only free entertainment available in these exorbitant days and listening to a speech was as good as hearing an entire concert by a fine

musician. Speakers seemed to come by their art by sheer efflux of time, and constant repetition. A dancing girl, by the time she came of age, knew all the nuances of her profession.

Those were the days of the loud-speaker. Loud-speakers were everywhere, and the politicians, the missionaries, the writers, priests, musicians and traders were constantly bawling into them. Funeral orations came through clearly from cremation ground and graveyard. The prayers to Rama being offered in the Brahmin street were magnified manifold by loudspeakers and made participating priests forget even to tie the knots of hair on the back of their heads, which came loose in the excitement, but incited them to louder chanting. The loudspeaker pervaded over everything.

Local and visiting politicians lambasted the government mercilessly, sometimes giving it a gentle warning, sometimes jeering at it. They even shed tears. When the people were already smarting under the misrule of the government, it was adding insult to injury (public speakers and platitudes went together) by yet another anti-people act. With choking throats and unbottled emotions, the speakers spat out words soaked in blood. When they called upon Nehru with extended arms like Jesus, everybody got the impression that Nehru was right there, in their midst. Had the injustices Gandhiji inveighed against died with him? An irrelevant question but speakers held other speakers responsible for past actions and past statements. Their concern for fellow-humans made them feel that nothing was too sacred to be above criticism. Their righteous anger sometimes made them indulge in vulgarities

for which they craved the pardon of their audience, and continued in the same vein.

The golden crown of rectitude sat now like a crown of thorns on the heads of those who tried to lead a righteous life. They had walked the path of virtue, not because they had particularly wanted to, but to gain a name as a morally superior person. Now they thought about all the pleasures they had missed, and were beginning to wonder if life had left them behind. They were full of self-pity, and regretted the many sacrifices they had made for conscience's sake which now seemed meaningless. The proper gentleman now felt only disgust for his previous highflown attitudes, and wanted to roll naked on the grass. He wanted to dance in a nightclub with a girl who shook her breasts and hips and behind. He wanted to stand in the street corner, shout, 'I am not a man of virtue', throw away his spotless upper-cloth, and plunge into the very vortex of pleasure and sin.

It was all right to go along with others, and denounce things as false, unreal, but at the same time one felt the attractions of the false. To condemn young women for adopting sexy attitudes as soon as they came of age was quite proper but one could not resist enjoying it also. We did not have the courage to admit that being natural was not quite so attractive. When girls abandoned their natural laughter, their natural movements, and their natural voice, and developed glamour, it was of course irresistible. Faces may have been attractive but masks were here to stay.

The times were such that one did not know what role one must play. Which of God's commandments might one break? One did not know. Conscience had

taken a back seat. The tenets of the Gita and the Kural came at us from every direction, but even those who carried the books managed secretly to break the precepts that those sacred books ordained. In this perhaps lay the secret of their success. The fear lurked in one's mind that if we blindly followed the codes we might lose out altogether. How the average man could benefit from a fool-proof code was not clear. Codes were good for saints but saints did not need them. How could one believe in something that guaranteed nothing? The time-honoured injunction was 'speak the truth', but it had never been determined when one may speak a falsehood. When may you cheat someone? When could you covet your neighbour's wife? We needed urgent answers to such questions. We could not any longer bear the burden of conscience.

The United Nations had donated a lovely playground which was situated in a corner of the park. Everything was available here—slides, see-saw, rings. In the evenings children came to play, but by the time the convent children went to their houses, changed and had something to eat, and came to the playground, it was fully occupied by the street children. The members of the United Nations were mainly the parents of the convent children, and these children had a vested interest in the playground, and they resented being pre-empted by the street children. Even the attendant, David, shared their anger, but there was nothing he could do about it. Once he tried to evict the street children by accusing them of spoiling the play equipment—a half-truth at best—but this did not get him very far, as the regulars in the park rose against him, and he was lucky that

reflects the problem of the upper & lower classes

he was not manhandled. Thereafter, a compromise was effected, and a system of queuing was adopted. Children had to line up in front of each play equipment and take their turn. The street children were not to jump over the walls before the playground gate was opened. There was to be no jostling as the gate was opened at four-thirty, and a queue was to be formed strictly in the order in which they arrived—no discrimination of caste, creed, colour, sex or social background, and everything started working out smoothly. Not that there were no problems at all. The see-saw, for instance, frequently had to be used by ill-matched pairs. A thin kid might be paired with a fat one because the queue had to be strictly adhered to, and neither enjoyed the game. You can't have everything.

Naturally, the children got tired, waiting for their turn, and kept hopping alternately on their legs. One of them might get frustrated, imagine that one of the lines was growing shorter, and make a beeline for it. Other children would naturally follow him with the result that the new queue he had started turned out to longer than the regular one. But as always with children, jumping the queue in itself became a game. When they got really tired they would get back to their original places, but soon enough it became dark, and they went back home, telling themselves they would never return to the playground. But of course all this was forgotten by the next evening when they would rush madly to join the queue. The wait was usually long, and some were frustrated enough to burst into tears. All of them pounced on David, holding him the cause of their troubles.

The times have changed. When the casuarina grove was transformed into a modern park, time also seemed to be moving rapidly. When one thinks about it deeply, it seems like an illusion. But it was real too.

CHAPTER FIVE

When a stranger walks a mile or so past Joseph's laundry on Asaripallam road, the huge gate of St Mary's Garden is likely to give him the impression that the road ends there. Coming up, he will only see the wide gate and the huge, spotted granite walls surrounding it, in the north, and monstrously big trees in the south. When buses go past him towards the gate, he confidently expects to see them crash against the gate, and is astonished when they veer sideways and disappear in an instant. In actual fact, there is a right-angle turn there, like the neck turning towards the shoulder. If one goes further on, one will see the Asaripallam road go past the Garden, a long, unending distance, with no blocks on the way. Down the road, behind the trees a huge building looms large. This is St Mary's Palace.

On Mondays and Thursdays, one can see on Asaripallam road groups of poor children going towards the palace. It is six in the morning, and many of the children have not yet shed their sleep. They are ragged, clothed in torn shirts, shorts and blouses, clad in one half and not the other, some wearing the clothes of their parents. Every one of them carries a big vessel. The Archbishop has been distributing milk at the Palace for two years now. At first only Christian children went for the milk, the others were afraid that they might be converted, and their parents were not about to exchange their religion for powdered milk. But as time went by, and one could

see how much better nourished the Christian children seemed to be, scruples went overboard, and the Hindus began sending their children also for the milk.

The children who now crowd outside the Palace with their pots and pans are sufficient in number to fill two elementary schools. The Archbishop makes sure that no child goes back empty-handed. There are four or five enormous stone vats in the courtyard—with St Mary presiding benignly over them—which nearly overflow with milk. If he sees the sight, the god Vishnu, who is reputed to rest on an ocean of milk, may want to change his residence.

The bell has rung—it is seven now. There is a milling crowd of children in front of the closed gates. Others take up positions wherever they can. One of the kids who is peering through the grill keeps up a running commentary for the benefit of the others. 'Hey, they are opening the tins . . . they are now mixing the powder with the water . . . don't pour so much water, sir! . . . here comes the big swami (the archbishop) . . . swami, good morning, our respects to you . . . get ready, all of you, the big beard is coming to open the gate!'

It was a Thursday. It had rained heavily all night, then had tapered down to a drizzle, and now at daybreak a heavy downpour began again. When it let up a little, the children ran up to the palace gate, but another group of children, coming from the Mada street, just managed to reach the tamarind tree junction, took shelter under the tree, and amused themselves by kicking the puddles of water about. Raindrops fell ceaselessly on their heads. Some

covered themselves with their shirt-collars while others held the pots and pans over their heads. Raindrops fell on the pots and splattered.

The drizzle ceased. As the children were getting ready to proceed to the palace, a group of municipal workers, followed by their supervisor on a bicycle, arrived at the tree. The supervisor leaned his bicycle against a closed shop-front, and began to call the muster roll from a notebook he carried. The workers who were present answered when their names were called.

A woman scavenger was sitting beside a tap outside the compound wall of the park, unmindful of the damp. Her ripe and blooming body needed a blouse to cover it. Some of the children were staring alternately at her and at the municipal supervisor who was taking attendance, but her gaze was riveted on the tamarind tree.

'But, look at the number of fruits on this tree!' she said. The boy standing next to her agreed that the fruits were hanging in great big clumps and bunches, gazing at the tree also. His mouth began watering, and he swallowed surreptitiously. Suddenly a breeze shook the tree, raindrops came down mightily, and a tamarind fruit fell in front of the woman. The boy quickly picked it up, and was about to bite it when the woman said, 'Please give me half, my little prince, my darling.'

The boy hesitated for a moment, but then gave her a piece. She stuck her tongue out, and rubbed the fruit against it. Her eyes rolled in ecstasy. The boys laughed and she also laughed. Another young woman scavenger came by. She also had a well-developed body, and looked very attractive in a checked blouse with short sleeves, oiled and

well-combed hair. She wore a number of black bangles on her right hand. She wore the glow of recent marriage. She asked the woman, sitting by the tap, 'Were you sick this morning?'

'Sick? Sick? Don't ask me. I woke up with my stomach churning, and it hasn't stopped since then,' and she took another taste of the tamarind fruit with her tongue. The younger woman looked at her with unblinking eyes, and asked, 'Is it sour?'

'Oh, you can have no idea how sour it is. It gets right to the top of your head, and how good it is for my nausea,' and she rubbed the fruit against her tongue several times.

The younger woman abruptly left the place, went to where the men were standing, and tapped the shoulder of a young, sturdy, khaki-clad scavenger, and whispered something to him, pointing out to the tamarind tree. He separated himself from the crowd, and she followed him.

The muster had been concluded, and the supervisor had left, after giving some instructions. Not even the small shops were open yet—the shopkeepers must have been kept back by the rain. It was still drizzling.

The young scavenger looked to his right and to his left. No one seemed to be watching him. He picked a piece of gravel from a heap by the water-tap meant for mending the road. Sighting with his left forefinger, he flung the stone at the tree. A number of fruits fell down which were gladly gathered up by the young scavenger women and the children. Many of the women who were just a little too late coaxed their husbands into getting some of the fruit for them. Now all the scavengers were flinging stones at the tree. The children, who had

been afraid that the scavenger might take them to task if they tried to get some of the fruit, now flung stones at the tree with gay abandon. Weaker children and women collected the fruit. Another group of children who had just arrived at the tree, as well as scavengers who had held back until then started throwing stones at the tree. The fruit fell down in great heaps, and people picked up handfuls. The children who could not go to the palace for milk filled their vessels with the fruit. The gravel heap had disappeared, but the gravel pieces were strewn around the trunk of the tree, along with broken boughs and dry and green leaves.

A boy with a nice sense of mischief suddenly shouted, 'Police!' and the boys scattered, shouting 'Victory to Mahatma Gandhi!' not realizing until they had run some distance that it was a false alarm.

The children reached the palace an hour late. The sweepers began their work later than usual. The sweeper who had the job of keeping the surroundings of the tamarind tree clean did a meticulous job. He removed every piece of gravel and heaped them up near the water-tap as before. He kept back a Congress flag he found on the ground thinking that he might make a dress out of it for his child. When the overseer came to inspect, the place was spotlessly clean. Not a fruit, not a leaf, not a bough was lying about. There were still some responsible sweepers left! Mentally, he commended the employee who had done such a thorough job.

CHAPTER SIX

The tamarind tree that stood at the crossroads was the property of the municipality. For that matter, the municipality owned thousands of trees: tamarind, mango, neem and innumerable banyan trees. The banyan flanked the roads, let down its branches like so many merry-go-rounds, which in turn let down shoots, now swaying in the dusty wind, only to become additional trunks in the fullness of time. Though the trees belonged to the municipality, and the income from them belonged in theory to the municipality, that august institution hardly made any money from them. The shepherds depended solely on the town's trees for fodder for their beasts. Feeding goats the leaves and shoots of the banyan trees that belonged to the municipality, and profiting from the milk of the well-fed goats was, for them, the most attractive aspect of goat-raising. And of course profitable too. However, the one tree that was exempt from the predation by the people was the tamarind tree. The municipality made a handsome revenue from the tree, and there was a good reason for it.

Standing at a crossroads as it did, the tamarind tree knew neither day nor night, for there was activity all around it right through the twenty-four hours. The rest of the town might be asleep, but there was always bustling activity around the tamarind tree. Travellers to other places, pilgrims who had returned from a holy dip at Kanyakumari and wanted to continue their journey, all found a refuge, a resting

place under the tree. Pedlars and jugglers and necromancers gathered here to show off their wares and wiles. Whatever you wanted to buy here cost exactly the same whichever vendor you chose to patronize. Another attraction here was the cinema. People would wait for the late show. Others would keep peering at the posters, listening to the snatches of music that came from here and there. Some would be in a trance, going over in their minds the scenes they had just then seen in the theatre. There were people who waited for the two-thirty bus, in the air-conditioned comfort of the theatre, watching a while, snoozing a while, opening their eyes for a favourite song or dance or sword-play or a romantic duet.

In the midst of this manic scene, it would have been impossible to steal fruits from the tamarind tree. Not that many did not want to do so, but they did not want to be caught at it either. No wonder not a fruit was stolen from the tamarind tree all these days.

It was a good tree, the tamarind tree, and every year it brought fruit forth bountifully. I think it might have known that no one person owned it but that it belonged to everybody equally. Now, as the tree belonged to the municipality, its produce and the revenue from it belonged to the municipality too. But the municipality had no use for tamarind. In fact, it had no use for rice or salt or cereal. What it needed was income, good, hard cash with which to take care of the people's requirements. So the municipality would let out the tree for auction every year on the crossroads, and collect the proceeds.

It was a Thursday, and it was tom-tomed in the bazaar that the auction would take place the following afternoon at three. And on Friday, a municipal employee and an attendant made their

way to the tamarind tree junction. The employee's name was Vallinayagam Pillai. He had served the municipality for nineteen years, and his salary, including dearness allowance, was thirty-three rupees and a few annas. Though an ordinary employee, he was highly influential in his office as he was the only one there who was thoroughly familiar with all the rules. He would suggest the right way of bringing to book a tax-defaulter of long standing. At the same time he would advise the defaulter on how to get out of the predicament. His advice to the municipality earned him his legitimate salary. His helping the defaulter took care of the short-fall in his financial needs. His dexterity in this regard was what kept his wife and children going.

Vallinayagam had a very fair complexion. Walking about for years in the hot sun had darkened it somewhat, but one could see that he was still quite fair. Thick hair, chappals with tyre soles which looked like little boats, collarless shirt, face pitted by deep smallpox marks.

Though the auction was announced for three o'clock, people knew it would start only at four and would start gathering at that hour. Vallinayagam wanted to get to the tamarind tree junction by four-thirty at the least, but one way and another it was four-fifty by the time he reached the junction. The attendant placed a three-legged stool under the tree which he had brought with him. Vallinayagam looked around him. Small groups of people were scattered around, but they did not seem to be there for the auction. The fruit of the tree had been auctioned for eleven years now, but such a situation had never occurred before. The auction was usually quite a draw, and all the shopkeepers would gather

around to watch the proceedings. Even the reporter from Travancore Nesan, who covered all events with a mixture of fact and fiction, was not to be seen—he had never missed the auction in previous years. Valli, who had conducted the auction every year, knew the regulars who would come, and they were not here today. He recollected some of the interesting incidents from previous years.

Among those who never missed the auction (in order of importance) were Vadaseri Brahmananda Mooppanar, Kottar Abdul Ali Saheb, and Kizhatheru Ayyamperumal Konar. Until he went to serve in the palace of the Maharaja of Travancore, Thazhakudi Mootha Pillai was also a regular. His participation aroused high anticipation among the crowd. Abdul Ali Saheb and he were bitter rivals, and the competition between them created much excitement.

Thazhakudi Mootha Pillai usually arrived in his double-bullock cart. A hereditary wealthy farmer, he was highly respected in the town as he had also taken on lease some of the lands of the Maharaja and of the Vadaseri lady. Mootha Pillai carefully cultivated a simple appearance, aware that it gave a special distinction to him. He wore only a laundered single veshti, a Vadaseri upper cloth, loosely spread over his shoulders, and a black handkerchief tucked in his waist for blowing his nose after a sniff of snuff. He had a bad case of eczema, and he would double up his veshti and hold it up above his knees, so that the border would not be dirtied by the medicine he used which absorbed the street dust all the time.

On the day of the auction of the tamarind tree he would leave home around two in the afternoon. He would go to Kottar and buy fodder for the bullocks and a pound of the best Jaffna tobacco for

himself and his wife, and go on to the tamarind tree junction. He would then stretch himself in the coach with his head sticking out, inspecting the tree as his cart went round it two or three times. He would estimate the expected yield that year and be ready to make his bid.

He would have the cart parked in front of Abdul Khader's shop across the street, and he would not open his mouth until towards the end. In the meantime, his bidding was done for him by his cartman, Nagaru Pillai, who would receive his instructions from Mootha Pillai inside the cart through some sort of eye-communication. The rule was that if you wanted to outbid a competitor, you should offer at least one chakram (smallest coin of the realm) more than the other's bid.

At the beginning of the auction Abdul Ali Saheb and Mootha Pillai would remain silent while others bid just to keep it going. Last year the tree went for thirty-three and a half rupees. The children, to whom this was a game, bid seven rupees, seven and a half, whatever came to their mind. Now Ali Saheb, as if he had just woken from a deep sleep, looked around indifferently and said, twenty-one rupees. Mootha Pillai now sat up inside his cart, his cartman looked at him and got his instructions, and shouted out to the world, twenty-one rupees and one chakram. Pillai always bid only one chakram more than the other man because it was the rule. Any transaction, he believed, should either fetch a big profit or suffer only a small loss. Younger people in the crowd tittered as they did not understand these subtleties, but the men of experience admired Pillai's principles. 'Oh that Pillai! What an operator! Who can hope to better him?' they said among themselves.

Now, Brahmananda Mooppanar, quite diffidently, would bid, twenty-two. Mootha Pillai would remain silent until Ali Saheb raised the bid. Twenty-seven rupees, this from the Saheb. The attendant would shout, twenty-seven rupees, once . . . twice . . . twice, and his voice would trail in anticipation of a higher bid. Nagar Pillai would look inside the cart. 'The Saheb, eh?' and Nagar Pillai would assent. Mootha Pillai would be exasperated. He would mutter the scoundrel won't give up, and show Nagar Pillai his forefinger. Nagar Pillai would shout immediately, twenty-seven rupees and one chakram! The crowd would laugh. Someone would shout just for the hell of it, twenty-seven rupees and two chakrams. More laughter. Mootha Pillai was not disturbed by this. He assumed that the crowd was laughing at Saheb adding to his bid without really knowing what he was doing. The attendant would start again, once . . . twice . . . twice, when the Saheb would get angry suddenly, and shout, thirty-two rupees. The crowd would be hushed now, and a dozen bidders would eliminate themselves. This was a critical point in the proceedings as Ali Saheb's bid had come close to the sum the tree had fetched last year. Everybody was looking eagerly at Mootha Pillai's cartman to see what he would do next. From inside the cart came out a pair of eczema-ravaged legs with a walking-stick. Nagar Pillai jumped from his perch in the front and gave a hand to Mootha Pillai. Holding on to Nagar Pillai for support, and arranging his veshti above his knees with his left hand, Mootha Pillai crossed the cement road, and reached the foot of the tree. At Vallinayagam's request he sat on the stool. He asked Valli, 'Son-in-law, whose was the last bid, and

for how much?' Vallinayagam's first wife was the niece of the lady who was Mootha Pillai's neighbour in Thazhakudi. Hence the intimate way of address, though the crowd had no way of knowing that, and merely assumed that the two were intimate with one another.

Valli said, 'The Saheb was the last bidder, for thirty-two rupees.'

'Is that so?' said Mootha Pillai. 'He has nothing to worry about. If the sun beats down it is good money for him.' The crowd laughed at this sly joke. Most of them knew that Ali Saheb owned a great many salt-pans.

The attendant raised his voice again, once . . . twice . . . twice, when Mootha Pillai said calmly, thirty-two rupees and one chakram, and the crowd broke into uproarious laughter, and the older people repeated what they had said earlier about Pillai's smartness. Mootha Pillai would sit through all this with a totally expressionless face, as if he were god's stone representation.

Recollecting all these old episodes, Vallinayagam waited there, laughing to himself. After a while, he began to wonder, 'Where is Mootha Pillai today? And for that matter, Abdul Ali Saheb? And Konar who lives only a short distance away? Even the crowd which usually comes to see the fun is not here?' when someone called out to him. It was Damodaran in the well of his shop, who directed Valli's attention by a nod of his head to where soda-bottles were stacked by the side of the shop. Leaning lightly against the crates, coolie Ayyappan was covering his mouth with his right hand to hide his laughter.

Damu asked him politely what he had come

there for. Ayyappan turned towards the shop, laughed loudly, and said he had come for the auction. 'What do you think the tree will go for?'

'I estimate, at forty-five rupees.'

'Why do you think the bid will go up?'

'Because there is a lot of green grass this time!'

Ayyappan slipped away by the side of the shop, but his explosive laughter could be heard. Vallinayagam heard this and shouted at him angrily, 'Hey, you coolie, what are you laughing like that for? Is someone dancing about naked?' But Ayyappan covered his mouth with his hand and slunk away towards the gate of the park. Vallinayagam's face reddened, and Damu said to him placatingly, 'Don't get angry, sir.'

Valli was not to be pacified. 'I have been watching that fellow for a while, always that grin on the face. Just looking at him I want to slap him. I will get him one of these days, then he will know what is what. You want to laugh, do you? You won't when I am finished with you.'

As he was ranting, Damu continued, 'Please forget about punishing him, for a while, but look at the tree.' Before Damu could finish what he was saying, the attendant said, 'But there isn't a single fruit on the tree!' Vallinayagam kept staring at the tree, tongue-tied. Finally he asked Damu, 'What happened to the fruits on the tree?' Damu did not reply. 'I am asking you, where are the fruits?'

Damu said indifferently, 'The police station is only two furlongs away.'

'Damu, I know you well,' said Valli furiously.

Damu said equably, 'I know you well also.'

'Let us see.'

'Yes, let us see.'

Vallinayagam walked away from there furiously. Damu said to a customer who had just come in for a chew, 'He didn't know what had happened, he was blinking, so I showed him what had happened to the tree, and now he is attacking me.'

As Vallinayagam Pillai and the attendant were crossing the clock tower, someone clapped from behind them to attract their attention. They turned around and saw Vadaseri Brahmananda Mooppanar, and Abdul Ali Saheb, the latter wearing a tamarind-leaf pattern upper cloth which was trailing the ground, standing at the Lala Sweet Shop. Pillai instructed the attendant not to pay any attention but to keep on walking behind him. As they passed the Ananda Bhavan restaurant, a voice hailed Vallinayagam, 'Son-in-law!' and it was of course Mootha Pillai sitting in his cart, and drinking coffee that Nagar Pillai was pouring out for him. Valli responded respectfully, and Mootha Pillai asked him what the tree went for, concentrating all the while on his coffee.

Valli stalled for time, 'I did not see you there?'

'Well, I thought there was no point in competing with him year after year, and having arguments afterwards. What does it matter, let him have it. He thinks that when he sweeps up the fruits, he is going to make a lakh of rupees. Good for him, if he gets it. What say do I have in the matter? Do you agree?'

'You are right, of course.'

'So, what did the tree go for?'

'There was no auction, there was a small problem.'

'What problem?'

'There were no fruits.'

'On the tree?'

'Yes.'

'Not one fruit?'

'Not one fruit.'

'Then what is the problem? No fruits, no auction. Where does the problem come in?'

Vallinayagam said mysteriously, 'That is it, that is it.'

'Oh, you think the fruit was stolen?'

'I don't know.'

'It couldn't have been stealing. Maybe sparrows picked the tree.'

Vallinayagam looked at Nagar Pillai, and said to Mootha Pillai, 'If that is so, what were the sparrows doing all these years?'

'Well, there are more sparrows this year.'

'Why?'

'How would I know? But everything has increased in number this year—sparrow, locust, rat, bandicoot, lizard, mosquito—they have all grown out of number. Here is already the beginning of August, and not a drop of rain so far.'

Vallinayagam asked why, and Mootha Pillai became expansive. 'You see, it used to be that our state was ruled in the old days by one man. Now ten people are lording it over us.'

'Oh, you are referring to that?'

'A state must be ruled by one man, and the others should accept his orders. What is happening now is ridiculous. Suppose in my house I tell something, my wife tells something else, the children something else, and the cartman, and the sweeper and the cleaner and so on. Who is going to listen to whom? Do you follow what I am saying?'

As Vallinayagam was responding, he saw coming up behind him Abdul Ali and Moopanar with

a small crowd. He quickly took leave of Mootha Pillai, and unmindful of the others asking him to wait for them, walked away as fast as he could, still muttering something about having to report the matter to his office. Mootha Pillai laughed until his whole body shook. 'Look at him slinking away, having lost everything. This is what happens to thieves who lay their hands on the Lord's property.' An obscure reference to some previous episode. Nagar Pillai laughed along with him.

Ali Saheb and Moopanar came up to the cart, and Mootha Pillai asked them if it was a theft. The Saheb said he had no idea.

'I came by at about two o'clock, and couldn't see a single fruit on the tree, so I went away to the fields,' said Mootha Pillai.

'Was it a theft?' asked an old man standing behind Ali Saheb wearing an open coat and canvas shoes.

Mootha Pillai continued. 'This is how our government is going to be run from now on. All and sundry are lording it over us. To my knowledge this tree has been put up for auction since 1903 or 1904. It was very cheap and I have bid many times. This is the first year there has been no auction. Probably it will happen next year too. As you are walking along somebody quickly removes your veshti. When you protest, he says this is my second veshti, I saw you go about with a G-string. And the people around will only support him.' The people standing near the cart laughed, and the old man approved. 'Well said.'

Someone in the crowd asked Mootha Pillai. 'Have you been to the Palace recently?'

Pillai said, 'Yes, just last week around the same time we had a long talk, he honoured me by giving me a seat at his level.'

'He is unhappy?'

'Yes, what else do you expect? Here we are beating our breast over the loss of the fruit of a tamarind tree. When someone loses his kingdom how do you expect him to feel? But he told them—this is what he said to me—to treat the people well, rule justly, be subservient to Lord Padmanabha. He still has his status, his properties, his palaces, his servants. Nothing will change materially for him. But the unhappiness will always be there.'

'Will they give him back the state if he asks for it back?' asked the old man in the open coat. Everybody laughed.

Mootha Pillai studied the crowd. There were several young men in it. He said, 'I am going to the municipality to file a complaint. Anybody who wants to come, follow me. Nagar, start the cart.' The cart proceeded towards the municipality. About fifty people followed it.

CHAPTER SEVEN

About half a mile north of the Tamarind Tree Junction, on the left, adjacent to St Joseph's College, stands the Ceylon Pentecostal Mission. The road leading to this point gradually becomes steep and rises as high as a palmyrah tree within a furlong. As it begins to descend, a lane to the left leads straight to the green gate of the municipal office. The building looks like a demented old priest with beard and whiskers, because of all the extraneous growth on its walls. Its original owner was Mohideen Batcha Saheb, a great friend of Damodara Asan. Batcha Saheb had several of his wives living in it, along with a clutch of eunuchs, to guard the harem, and to fetch and carry. I have heard that one of the eunuchs committed suicide by hanging himself from the neem tree. When Batcha Saheb lay dying in the hospital from an advanced case of leprosy, the building was auctioned, and the municipality bought it for a song. The Municipal Council now meets in what used to be the stable, which looks respectable enough with a new thatched roof and a coat of paint.

Vallinayagam Pillai opened the green gate, entered and was about to latch it when the attendant who had come with him said, 'There seems to be a rowdy crowd behind us.' Pillai turned around and looked. A cart and a group of people were coming towards the Municipal building. As the lane was narrow Pillai got the impression that it was a very large crowd indeed. His tyre-chappals flapping, he ran up the stairs, reached the hall, and ignoring the clerks working there, stormed into the Chairman's

office. Only to find the chair empty. Peon Sonachalam Pillai was dusting the files, and tying them up with red tape. Valli demanded, 'Where is the Chairman?' Sonachalam Pillai walked up to the window, leaned out and spat paan-juice. 'What is the matter, master?' he asked.

'I am in a hurry, just tell me where he is.'

'He is in the council meeting,' said Sonachalam, extending his hand for a pinch of snuff. Vallinayagam ignored him, started down the stairs, when Sonachalam said again, 'Just a pinch. Or at least tell me what is happening.'

Vallinayagam hurried on, saying over his shoulder, 'Theft in the tamarind tree. Not a pie of revenue this year.'

Sonachalam said to himself as he went back to the Chairman's office, 'If it is gone, it is gone, why all this fuss?'

There was the usual noise and confusion in the council room with which Vallinayagam was quite familiar. He went straight to the Chairman, M.C. Joseph, and stood by his side. Joseph flinched when he saw the expression on Valli's face, and looked enquiringly at him.

'An emergency,' said Vallinayagam.

'Go ahead,' said the Chairman.

Pillai hesitated for a moment, looked outside to indicate he wanted a private interview. The Chairman got up, smiled at the members, went out with Valli, and holding on to a roof-pole, again looked enquiringly at him. All eyes in the council room, which had now fallen totally silent, were on them, and Valli's hope of passing on the information to the Chairman without creating a general furor was shattered.

'Speak up,' said the Chairman.

'You know, the tamarind tree was to be auctioned today,' said Valli, slowly, swallowing the words, with an ingenuous look on his face.

'Well, what did it go for?'

'There was no auction,' said Valli hesitantly.

'What happened? Didn't enough people come?'

'No, there was no fruit on the tree.'

'No fruit?' asked the Chairman incredulously.

'Not one.'

'You had reported on the tree last week.'

'Yes.'

'What does that "yes" mean?'

'I had estimated that the tree would fetch forty-five rupees.'

'Then what is all this nonsense about?'

'There were fruits on the tree at that time.'

'And now?'

'Not one.'

'Theft?'

'I do not know.'

The Chairman looked at the members of the council who were sitting silently and eagerly inside. Vallinayagam said, 'There is a big crowd outside.'

'What?'

'A crowd. You know that trouble-maker, Thazhakudi Mootha Pillai. He has brought some people with him to make an issue of this.'

The Chairman said plaintively, 'Do I have to go out and talk to them?'

'No, that won't be necessary. Just quietly send someone else to speak to them.'

'Like who?'

'Send Panaimaram.'

'The fellow from the twenty-third ward?'

'Same fellow. He will calm them down in no

time. If you go to meet them, the rabble will dare to question you.'

The Chairman went back into the council room and took his usual seat. Gnanasigamani, the leader of the opposition, rose and said, 'Please tell us if the matter is something we should be aware of.' Immediately following him, Maria Anthoni, Suriakosu, Anbiah, Chellasami, V.X. Fernandez (Jr.) and others leapt up from their seats, and demanded to know what had happened.

After consulting the Commissioner of the council, the Chairman informed the council about the disastrous event. Whereupon, Umaiyaorupagam Pillai rose and said, 'This is a major occurrence. An inquiry commission should be constituted to look into it.' Several members of the ruling party and the entire opposition supported the suggestion. An inquiry commission was nominated, with Umaiyaorupagam Pillai as Chairman, and six participating members. The council rose for the day. The Chairman went out and whispered something to 'Kamba Ramayanam' Ananthan Pillai, who said, 'Is that all? I'll go right out and speak to the mob in such a fashion that they will applaud me and go away like good boys,' and went out to meet the crowd.

Feeling somewhat relieved, M.C. Joseph, Chairman, went back to his office but found there, to his dismay, Thazhakudi Mootha Pillai, Abdul Ali Saheb, and Iyemperumal Konar in a serried row.

Abdul Ali Saheb made a beginning. 'Nothing in particular, but we thought we should tell you in person what has happened.'

Mootha Pillai interrupted him by saying, 'The tamarind tree is still standing in the junction,' and he winked at his cartman, Nagar Pillai, through the window.

The Chairman said, 'We have set up an inquiry committee. Nothing like this has ever happened before. It is very responsible of you all . . . ' when Mootha Pillai again interrupted, saying, 'Too true, too true.'

Outside the council chamber shouts were heard: 'Mahatma Gandhi ki jai! Victory to Mahatma Gandhi!'

Vallinayagam Pillai entered the room at that point, and said that 'Kamba Ramayanam' had done a great job, pacifying the crowd and soothing wounded feelings. He added sadly: 'As the crowd was leaving, some of the fellows damaged a few plants.' This was a prospective alibi offered in the presence of witnesses. Iyemperumal Konar got up, followed by the Saheb. They put their palms together in a gesture of respect, and begged to take their leave. But Mootha Pillai told them he would follow them in a few minutes. The Saheb muttered, to himself, 'All right, fill his head with whatever nonsense you want,' but walked out with Konar, asking Mootha Pillai to join them whenever he was ready.

Mootha Pillai looked around, contorted himself into a submissive posture, pointed to the wall in front of him, and asked, 'There used to be a picture hanging there, it now seems to be missing?'

'You mean, the portrait of our Maharaja?' Mootha Pillai assented, and the Chairman said, 'Oh, I have put it away.'

'Then what are you going to do with it?'

The Chairman looked at Valli expressionlessly, and asked, 'What do you think we should do with it?'

And Vallinayagam Pillai gave the expected reply, 'We will have to auction it after some time.'

Mootha Pillai said, 'That is what I wanted to know. Help me to get it at the auction, I don't mind paying five or ten extra.'

The Chairman said, 'That should be no problem.'

'Don't let it get stolen!' said Mootha Pillai, and they all burst into loud laughter. Mootha Pillai took a respectful farewell of the Chairman, Vallinayagam followed him to see him off, the Chairman asked him not to stay away too long, and of course Valli said he would be back in a moment. Outside, Mootha Pillai, as he was getting into his cart, said to Valli, 'My boy, you have to make sure that I get the picture even it costs me a bit more.' Valli assured him it would be done, sent him on his way, and went back to Joseph's chamber.

'Was it really a theft?' asked the Chairman. Vallinayagam Pillai stood with his back to the wall, a look of fierce concentration on his face, the sweat dripping down his neck. The Chairman started to make himself comfortable. He removed his long coat and draped it on his chair. He loosened his broad belt. He removed his chain watch and placed it on his desk. He took out a mirror from a drawer and coaxed his thick moustache into covering his upper lip. He parted his hair again; and set it on either side of his head.

'Don't stand around, Vallinayagam, sit on that stool,' he chided Valli with a trace of affection. 'Turn the fan towards yourself.' Valli obeyed and made himself comfortable. 'So it was a theft, was it?'

'How can one say for sure? It could be a theft. But what can one say about what one did not see for oneself?'

'Do you suspect anybody? This Gnanasigamani crowd would do anything to create trouble.'

Valli said rather recklessly, 'These boys from the main street will do anything.'

The Chairman bristled, 'I am also from the main street, you forget. Are you accusing my family?'

Valli realized his mistake and protested, 'No, no, I didn't mean anything like that. But you can't say everybody is alike. People differ from one another, (and using the English word) people's nature also differs.'

'That's enough,' the Chairman said. 'You had me badly worried for a minute.'

Valli tried to change the subject quickly, and said, 'I don't think the opposition had anything to do with this affair.'

'Sure?'

'Absolutely sure,' said Vallinayagam.

'Who then?' asked the Chairman.

And Valli said, 'I have a strong feeling that the scavengers may have done it.'

The Chairman was bewildered. 'Why should the scavengers steal the fruit from the tamarind tree?'

Valli responded promptly, 'Don't underestimate them, they are no longer the dumb lot they used to be. There are folk among them who dream of sitting in your chair with their feet on the desk. You can't really blame them, this is what comes of giving them the vote. They get ideas.'

The Chairman was exasperated, and said sharply, 'Come to the point.'

Valli said, 'Point? This is the point. They have formed a union. They want better wages. They want housing. They want a gramophone! Are you willing or able to give them all this? So they tell themselves that they will teach the authorities a lesson . . .'

'Do they really have that much guts?'

'Why not? Big political parties are behind them. Do you know Padmanabhapuram Kothandarama Iyer's son?'

'The bearded fellow?'

'Yes, the same, bearded, dark, strong beyond words.'

'Ah, you mean Janardhanan.'

'Yes, we used to call him Sathu. When he leaped into the tank, he was like a buffalo, messing the water all around him. He wouldn't let anyone else bathe. He tried his tricks with me one day, and I grabbed him by his ear and dragged him to the edge of the tank, and flung him there. He screamed, asked me how dare I touch him. I said to shut up if he knew what was good for him. He ran straight to his father, big boy that he was, and complained about me. His father said Municipality Valli is a good man, has done a lot for our family, and what he did was quite correct. You know, the Padmanabhapuram Iyer and I were at school together, and he used to copy my answers. He used to scratch my knees to get my attention without the teacher noticing it, and would keep imploring me to show him my answers.'

The Chairman was getting tired of what he thought was an irrelevant reminiscence, but Valli continued quickly, 'I am just trying to tell you how I know Janardhanan. Even today, whenever we run into each other, Janardhanan breaks out into a big laugh and says he can still feel the pain of my screwing his ear.' Vallinayagam laughed, and so did M.C. Joseph. Peon Sonachalam came in, Valli got up from his stool, and the Chairman asked Sonachalam to clean up the damaged plants, and the peon went out.

Valli said, 'What was I saying?' The Chairman reminded him that they were talking about Janardhanan. 'Ah yes. When he grew up, he studied law. He would tell people that he hurried through his studies so that he could go to jail fighting for freedom, but Gandhi had already got the country freedom, he

would complain. He put up a board but no client went to him. Even if one gave his case to him, he was sure to lose. If Janardhanan appeared for the plaintiff, the defendant was sure to win. So he has been turning his mind to other things, and is now cultivating the scavengers, hoping to create some trouble of course. Our Madasami is his great friend, and seeing them together you would think they were twins. Do you see my point?'

'You think he might have provoked the plundering of the tamarind tree?'

'I certainly have that doubt. He has been inciting the scavengers who have been minding their own business all these years. Now they are demanding dearness allowance, they want fair-price shops, pregnancy leave. The women want to tie ribbons to their brooms so they will look "stylish". They are not satisfied with a sari and a blouse, but they want a bodice also with tapes which they can tie behind their backs. That is what the scavenger women want!'

The Chairman exploded into a vast burst of laughter, his huge belly shook, and he began to wheeze. 'Stop it,' he said in between bouts. 'Let us think about what we should do now? What ideas do you have?'

'First, we must give a formal complaint to the police.'

'To the police?'

'Yes.'

'Come on now, you know that the police are waiting for a chance to give the municipality a hard time.'

'However that may be, you have to make a complaint, otherwise you will be under attack in the council tomorrow.' The Chairman realized his predicament. And Valli proceeded relentlessly, 'You

have to do it. You can't tell the council that the police is hostile towards the municipality. We have our problems with them, yes, but the record should be correct.' The Chairman agreed. Valli continued, 'Let us do everything in proper form, let us file the complaint first.'

The Chairman continued to look doubtful. He said, 'The police will have a good laugh when we go to them for help. We have not been known to get along with one another in the past.' Then something flashed in his mind, and he said excitedly, 'Valli, you don't suppose it is possible that the police themselves . . .' but Valli stopped him short, and admonished him not to say such things openly. A footstep was heard, a head peeped over the half-door, the Chairman dismissed Vallinayagam after assuring him that he would file the complaint immediately.

At nine the next morning, as usual, Paramarthalingam picked up the keys of the shop from the owner's house, and went to open it. Only to stare in stupefaction at the splintered pieces of red glass that littered the shop-front. For a moment he could not understand where so much broken glass could have come from, when coolie Ayyappan, who was resting under the tamarind tree called out, 'Brother, look up!' The signboard of the shop had been completely smashed. Only the frame for the lettering remained, with bits and pieces of the glass letters sticking to it. Paramarthalingam asked the obvious question, rhetorically, 'How did the board come to be smashed?' Ayyappan spread his hands to indicate he knew nothing about it, and left.

Paramarthalingam opened the shop and telephoned the owner. The attendants were coming

one by one, and stopped to stare at the scattered bits of glass. The horn of the owner's car was heard, and they went in and ranged themselves behind the long counter.

The signboard had been ordered for two thousand rupees from a Bombay firm, and it was hardly two weeks since their Madras branch had come and set it up. It was a unique board, there was none like it in the district. When it was switched on, each letter would be lit, one after the other, the completed board would remain shining for a few minutes, and the whole process would be repeated over and over again. The day it was put up, the entire street came to look at it, and Khader the owner felt he had been accepted as the most prominent merchant of them all.

Khader sat silently in his chair, looking at a box of splinters that had been picked up, when Isakki came in and announced, 'Only our signboard has been broken.'

'What about the cinema theatre?'

'It is not broken.'

'So our signboard was singled out for this treatment.' The attendants did not respond.

All the signboards were kept out in the open, and no one thought of locking them inside the shop along with the cash. There was a scarcity of electric bulbs during the war, and they were usually stolen from verandas, open garages, bathrooms, but never from the bazaar. It simply was not likely that someone had stood in the middle of the road, flung stones at the board and smashed it. In that entire area there were people in the tamarind tree junction all the time. The late show in the cinema theatre gave over usually around one-thirty, and until then there was a lot of bustle around the tree. Then the buses for Tirunelveli

would leave at four, every forty minutes on the hour. By six the small traders would start opening their shops. If it were a market day, the vendors would arrive with their baskets by four or four-thirty. People would go to bathe in the river, picking up their towels from their shops, carrying oil and husk-powder. In addition, the police patrolled the area at nights, and several shops had Gurkha watchmen. With so much activity, right through the night, how could his signboard alone have been smashed? When the boy called him from the shop, a germ of a doubt had begun to form in Khader's mind. Now several reasons occurred to him to confirm the doubt. This was definitely a carefully planned act. For some time now, he had been having strange misgivings that something was likely to go wrong.

Khader called all the attendant boys by name, and they came out from wherever they were keeping out of sight. When they gathered around him, he asked them, 'Whose work was this?' There was no response. 'You were whispering among yourselves all this while, and when I ask you a simple question, you clam up. Are you afraid I am going to drag you to the court as witnesses? Speak up, fellows.' Again there was no response, but Muthu was heard muttering something. He was a small-built boy who was hidden partly by the bigger attendants. Now Isakki dragged him through a gap the boys made and pushed him in front of the master. 'What does Muthu have to say?' asked Khader, but Batcha piped up, 'Could the schoolboys have done it?' 'How can the schoolboys have done it? They cannot have done it during the day. And the junction bustles with activity until two in the morning. Are you suggesting that schoolboys set their alarms for two, then came here to throw stones?' asked Khader with heavy sarcasm. Batcha

looked abashed and agreed that schoolboys could not have done it. Khader then asked Muthu what he had been trying to say. Muthu said diffidently, 'Could the vultures not have done it?' All the boys burst into laughter, and Muthu's face reddened.

Khader glared at the boys. 'You don't have any ideas yourselves, and you sneer at someone who has thought of something. Go ahead, Muthu, tell me what you think,' and he drew Muthu close to him.

Muthu said in a weak voice, 'I think this might have been the work of vultures and eagles.'

Someone from the back said, 'Ah, you said sparrow first!' which Muthu denied indignantly. Khader shouted at the attendants to get behind the counter, and spoke gently to Muthu, 'Don't pay any attention to them. Look at me and tell me, how could a vulture or eagle have broken the board?' Muthu outlined his theory. 'First a lone vulture comes and sits on the board. The board is red isn't it?'

'Yes, it is.'

'It looks like it is full of banyan fruits.'

'Yes, indeed.' At this point, a couple of the boys, unable to suppress their laughter, ran into the ante-room. 'Don't look at them,' as Muthu's face reddened again. 'Let us assume they are banyan fruits. Then . . .?'

'The vulture would peck at the board, thinking it contained banyan fruits. Other vultures immediately gather around the board and start pecking also.' Khader agreed. 'I think you are right,' and Muthu eagerly added, 'The vultures together would have broken the board.'

Khader snapped at the other boys: 'At least he has an idea, you fellows don't have even that.'

After a while he called out to Muthu again. He said, 'You know a vulture has wings, don't you, Muthu?'

'Yes.'

'How many?'

'Two.'

'You said the vulture had broken the board, and you were right. But it was a wingless vulture.' Muthu looked at his master, eyes wide. 'Do you want to see that vulture?' Muthu nodded his head. 'Go round to the front of the shop and stand on the lower step.' Muthu did so. 'One step lower still.' Everybody was looking at Khader. 'Muthu, look on the right of the tamarind tree, idiot, I said right, not left. Now, start counting the south-facing shops, one by one. Look at shop number four. Do you see a short devil sitting there with his veshti tied inches below his navel, chest covered by black hair like a bear? Don't laugh. It is the vulture that smashed our board. He didn't do so thinking it contained banyan fruits. He did it out of the envy burning inside him. He was not born to a single father. He thinks he can play around with me. It is true once I made a living rolling tobacco in leaves to make bidis, and I may go back to that again. But in the meantime I am somebody. He doesn't know what I am going to do him.'

Paramarthalingam and Batcha came up to the cash-counter and said, 'We have the same suspicion too,' and Batcha looked at the boys behind the counter, and said to them, 'I already told you so.'

'But none of you had anything to say though I asked you over and over again,' said Khader sarcastically. Batcha muttered something to the effect that one cannot come right out and say immediately what one suspects. Khader asked Muthu to have the car brought around, and put the box with the broken glass in it.

As Khader left, Paramarthalingam said, 'The master is going to the police.'

CHAPTER EIGHT

Abdul Khader's home town was Thakkalay in Malabar, and his was among the families that fled south during the Moplah rebellion. His paternal ancestors were traditional attendants in the mosque. His father too served in the mosque in the early part of his career but over the years he lost his fervour, and started neglecting even his basic duties, and making mistakes in the rituals. He was duly dismissed. All the same he spent most of his time in the mosque meditating presumably, much to the irritation of Khader's mother who would send Khader to fetch his father for his meals. The old man hated to stir from the place, as Khader remembered.

Later on, when Khader, through his own efforts, made a success of his life, came to be known as the best merchant in the district and acquired riches, he would often reminisce about his early years to his friends. The recollection of his father always sent him into a frenzy, and he would damn the old man in every possible way. 'That dirty sinner, did he hug me and embrace me even once? No.' He would laugh heartily when he repeated to them his mother's description of his father as 'the mosque owl'. 'Poor woman, she didn't have a moment of pleasure in her life. I ran away from home, and worked so hard just so I could give her a home and the comforts she never had. But she died before I made good,' he would sigh. It was, in fact, his motivation when he ran away from home in his eleventh year to make bagfuls of money, provide his mother with everything she

wanted, and in that fashion take some sort of revenge against his father.

Khader had learnt early in life one of life's perennial truths: that wealth alone matters, that money had its uses even in situations where one would not expect it to play a role. He realized that people called his father mad, but praised the piety of Proprietor P.V. only because the latter was rich. Later, when he lost his heart to a girl he saw at a festival, and offered fifty rupees to the girl's mother, the mother herself brought the girl to his room and closed the door from the outside and kept vigil; while he took his clothes off and flung them into a corner, he realized all over again the power of money. He became convinced that everything would come to him who had money, or at the least could be bought.

He fantasized about owning a bungalow, a car, tea estate, chicken curry every day, silk clothing, a gold chain and watch. After a while, he added a beautiful girl to the list. Better-looking than even his mother—it was all bound to happen by the grace of Allah. How many beautiful girls he had seen in Travancore, in the Mecca-mandapam! In several houses, he had seen attractive tinkling feet beneath the door curtains. He was quite sure that the time would come when he would become wealthy enough to acquire all that he desired. He would then seek out his father, give him a room of his own in the bungalow, have him fed regular meals, and let him meditate to his heart's content. Also give him some money for his clothes and other expenses. But he would never let the old man see his mother—she would not want to see him anyway. He could watch how he, Khader, looked after his mother, have her bathe in a tub of milk, and enjoy every comfort she wanted. It is not enough to marry a beautiful woman,

one should also know how to take care of her. His father's dull brain could never understand that. Whether his father saw all that he accomplished or not, others would, and would praise him duly. The word would definitely get back to his father, that would be enough. Also, he wanted to enjoy the pleasures of life without losing his good health. He decided that he would make love to the pick of beautiful women. He would experience for himself all that life had to offer for one's enjoyment. Thus went Khader's thoughts as he was making his way up.

It is difficult though to describe Khader's activities during the next ten or fifteen years. Even he would not be able to give a coherent account of his life during those years. He obviously saw opportunity to make money beckoning him from everywhere—objects, situations, events, crises, everything seemed to show him a way to what would be productive, and what would not. And he developed astuteness and a capacity for unrelenting effort, and was not disheartened by failure. He learnt to talk with propriety, to show deference to others, and self-confidence. He also learnt to discard people when he had no further use for them. He had no exalted view of charity which was not something that could be bought or sold.

Later, he used to regale his friends with the account of how he earned a full rupee for the first time in his life. When he was working in the Noorjehan Hotel, he used to make up packets of husk-ash (which makes excellent tooth-powder) and sell them, at a pie each, to persons who came to the tank to wash and clean their mouths. The pies mounted up until he had a full rupee. One morning, as he was stealing the ash, the proprietor caught him

in the act and kicked him out. He did not particularly mind since he now had a rupee in his possession.

The jobs Khader did from his twelfth to twenty-second year were many and varied. He sold balloons and kites at the Suchindram temple car festival. He helped frame pictures in Kolappan Achari's shop. He rolled bidis. He repaired bicycles at the M.S.V. Cycle Mart. He sold newspapers for an agent. He sold combs and needles and mirrors by the roadside, as well as digestive powders. He touted at the bus-stand for hotel-owners to find custom for them from the passengers, and got small commissions from them. Finally at the age of twenty-two he found regular employment in Vallinayagam Pillai's cloth-shop. He had three hundred rupees saved.

Joining the cloth-shop was a major turning-point in Khader's life. He worked there for five years that moulded his career. For the first time he experienced the blessing of a settled life. Also, the years gave him the yearning to learn a particular job and all its intricacies, no longer did he want to go from town to town, jumping from job to job. For someone who had wandered about, rain or shine, he now wanted a settled occupation in a secure place.

Khader heard that Mahadanapuram Gopala Iyer was planning to open a cloth-shop. On a Friday, the weekly holiday for his shop, he went to see Gopala Iyer. He gave as an excuse for his visit a vague story about being in the neighbourhood to make collections. In the course of the conversation, he got the confirmation he wanted about Gopala Iyer opening a cloth-shop. And Gopala Iyer decided that Khader was the man to help him run the shop. All the way back, as he cut across the fields to get to the bus-stand, Khader kept laughing to himself in pleasure.

Gopala Iyer was an expert in making quick decisions. In his early years he had joined military service, though there was no real need for him to work, as his father was the richest man in the village. But Gopala Iyer had a fight with his father, and ran away from home, leaving behind a note that he was going to commit suicide. The Second World War was raging then, and he joined the army. It was not out of any feeling he had, that it would be better to die in a military encounter than commit suicide, for when he wrote the note to his father, he had had no intention of committing suicide, he had just hoped that his parents would be immeasurably grieved. Actually, his father was not one bit perturbed by the note. He dismissed the subject by saying that there was no indication in Gopalan's horoscope that he would commit suicide at that point. Some months later, Gopala Iyer wrote from Chhotanagpur asking for some money, according to the villagers, but his father wrote back, 'As you have committed suicide, it will not be possible for you to sign for the money,' and refused to send it. Nobody knows how far this was true, or whether it was only a joke.

One fine morning, Gopala Iyer, now in his thirtieth year, returned to the village, attired in his military uniform and cap, sporting a pair of dark glasses. He had grown enormously fat. Working much of the time outdoors, his complexion had darkened. His early baldness was now reaching the centre of his head. His lips were dark, as though they had been toasted in fire. There was a touch of coarse violence in his conversation.

No one in the village was willing to offer their daughters as a bride to him. His parents died one after the other in successive years. Gopala Iyer's only comment about his father was, 'As long as he was

alive, the man refused to give me a paisa. Now look, he has left everything to me. What can one say about this?'

The habits he had acquired while he was with the army he found hard to give up, if he tried to at all. Vegetarian food had become totally repugnant to him. He needed a drink frequently. Even men were afraid of his sharp tongue, and would veer away from him. The women-folk of the village were his fans though, and they would laugh at his wit. He usually sat with knees drawn-up on the platform outside his house, teasing and taunting the passers-by. He would go to the village priest's house, stand outside, and call out, 'Oh, Narayana Sastrigal, why don't you give me a sacred thread? It is so convenient for scratching one's back.' To Aravalai, the grass-cutting woman, he would say, 'Aravalai, if nobody gives me his daughter in marriage within a year, I am going to marry your daughter, I have decided.' The women would cover their mouths and run into their houses.

But Gopala Iyer was not intended to be Aravalai's son-in-law. This was a very poor country. Girls were plentiful. One could not be sure where one's next meal would come from. When Anandam Ammal decided to give her daughter in marriage to Gopala Iyer, her friends remonstrated. 'Your daughter is only fifteen years old, and pretty as a picture. And you want to sacrifice her to this forty-year-old bald man.' Anandam Ammal's response was brief. 'If she has good fortune, he will have a long life. If not, she will put on widow's clothes, and eat rice and milk.'

To buy clothes for the wedding, Gopala Iyer went to the shop of a Sindhi merchant in Madurai. He had to remain there for a few hours. As soon as he entered the shop, he was impressed by the

appearance of the owner, Dowlatram, who was sitting on a large, cushioned sofa, a huge cigar clamped in his teeth, and a ceiling fan revolving overhead. A thin gold chain was hanging on his chest, unhidden by his voile jubba which was unbuttoned. His eyes were blood-red, and Gopala Iyer knew what caused the redness, but Dowlatram spoke normally, and with great deliberation, as if he had just come out of an oil bath. (An oil bath can cause redness of the eyes.) Deliberation marked every one of Dowlatram's actions. He spoke deliberately and he moved deliberately. His eyes constantly roved around the shop, taking in everything that was going on. As his hand took a payment, his eyes quickly scanned the bill. While talking and laughing on the phone, he managed a stern look at the office-boy; give a welcoming smile to a customer; wink at a small child; as a baby cried he gave an order through facial gestures to the office-boy who went out and brought a packet of biscuits. Gopala Iyer thought to himself that he could sit there all day long, watching Dowlatram in action. A call came from Bombay, and the manner in which Dowlatram answered it in fluent English impressed Gopala Iyer profoundly. 'A prince, a real prince,' he told himself. He wanted to tell everybody in the village about Dowlatram, and wished he were sitting in that plush sofa himself.

He bought himself a book in English, titled, *Dare and Do*, and read it on the train, going back to his village. He smoked cigarette after cigarette, lighting a new one from the old, in the belief that he was doing some furious thinking. Every line in the book seemed to him to reflect his own thinking. Yes, life was only for the doing, and there could be no doubt that only constant effort would result in success. He drew the others in the compartment into

conversation, expressed his new-found views to them, and when some did not seem to agree, countered them with fresh reasoning. 'There is no sense in envying the progress the white man has made. Only he who dares will be supreme. We are afraid to bathe because the water might be cold,' he declared in a loud voice.

He made a firm decision as he got off the train at Tirunelveli. Half asleep in the bus to Nagercoil, he pursued the thought in an interior monologue. 'All right, you are very able, no one said you are not. Your face reflects your intelligence, your limbs function perfectly. Your good fortune will have men and women flocking to your shop. I am not saying no. Gold and silver and rice and grain will be poured at your feet. No one is denying that. Good fortune is smiling on you. But don't think you are the only lucky one. Somewhere there must be another, equally able, competent, efficient, full of ideas. Riches will be poured at his feet also. Don't think you alone are indispensable. You won't naturally like someone else coming up, that is why I am telling you all this.' After this imaginary peroration at Dowlattram, he continued his positive thinking. 'I have firmly decided to open a shop also. Don't sneer, aha, what a big shop. I will start small. I have some property. I shall sell the proceeds of a couple of seasons and put it into the business. If luck is on my side, the business will prosper, and I shall invest some more in it. Why not? I have ten years of military service. I speak excellent English. I am not saying you don't; you do too, and your accent is like that of an Englishman. But when I speak English, you would think it is a real Englishman speaking. I'll tell you what. One of these days, you are likely to go to Kanya Kumari for a pleasant outing with your wife and children. And

you will have to pass through Nagercoil. When you get here, ask where Gopala Iyer's shop is, and drop in for a few minutes. It may not be as big as yours, but you can see for yourself if it is at least half as big. What do you say? Too proud to enter my shop? Proud. . .

'What are you blabbering in your sleep, master, we have come to the clock tower,' the bus-conductor woke him up.

Within a month of his marriage, Gopala Iyer sold the produce of four seasons. It was rumoured he had acquired a shop in Nagercoil. He now had to procure the goods for sale. He was also on the lookout for an experienced hand in the textile business to help him run the shop. Some people suggested Khader's name to him, but they doubted if he would leave Vallinayagam. It was at this juncture that Khader went to see Gopala Iyer. As Iyer tried to probe his mind, Khader said, 'My proprietor treats me like a son. How can I break away from him? Anyway, you want to open shop only in January. There is time yet,' and left.

Khader did some serious thinking for a few days. The prospect before him was something like having to jump from a ship into a boat. And Vallinayagam Pillai's shop was like a well-anchored ship, while Gopala Iyer's boat could hardly survive a few waves and the wind. He consulted friends all of whom advised him against leaving Vallinayagam Pillai, and gave good reasons. Khader knew the reasons well enough himself, and he wondered if he might have to regret the decision to join Gopala Iyer. But decide he did, to leave Vallinayagam. When he finally told Pillai what he had in mind, Pillai was astonished and disappointed. Without revealing his feelings, he asked Khader to meet him at his house

on Friday. He did not want to discuss the subject in the shop as he was afraid Khader would become firmer in his determination to leave. Also Khader did not know what he, Valli, had in mind for him. He only knew that Vallinayagam did not mete out any special treatment to him in the shop. Now the time had come to let Khader know the plans he had for him, Vallinayagam thought, and that may make Khader change his mind.

On Friday, he made some small talk first, and then spoke earnestly. He said, 'Khader, you know my story well, and there is nothing really special about it. When Raja went away to Madras, refusing to look after the shop, I thought of closing down the business. But then I saw that you had become expert at procurement, and had a good notion of what goods to stock. I thought then that when young Mani finished school, I could put him in the shop and train him, and that, if anything happened to me, you would take him under your wing, and help him run the shop well. This has been my thinking all these years. I have also executed a document saying that you should get a fourth of the first ten years' profit. You know how much we are worth as of today, so calculate for yourself. Mani returns next year. I am also tired of looking after the shop. You must make him your responsibility and run the shop with him without losing our good name.'

Khader was looking down all this while. Still he did not look up. Vallinayagam continued. 'The day you came to work in the shop, I asked you to open out a towel, and then fold it again. You could not do it, and you had tears in your eyes, fearing that I might not employ you. Think about it. One can't be born with knowledge and experience, and you learnt a lot

from me. You have worked hard, as if it was your own shop. You pushed me into procuring materials from Bombay, and I don't deny that it brought us a handsome profit, and the business improved. Now, think about everything carefully. As they say, one must never leave a familiar place. You don't know Gopala Iyer. He can change his mind in a minute, ask people you know well. Don't try to cross the river on a clay horse. If you have any resentment towards me, tell me now and we'll sort it out. I don't really attach much importance to money, you should know that.'

Khader looked away, and remained silent. Vallinayagam proceeded with what he was saying. 'The time you had typhoid, I asked the shop-boys to look after you. I checked on the phone with your doctor morning and evening about your condition, so much so that he asked me jokingly whether I planned to adopt you. I paid his fees and the medical shop dues from my own personal funds and to this day I have not told you how much the total amount was. You know I wouldn't have done this for any one else, the feeling in my heart for you was such. You have been with me for a long time. You wouldn't want me to grieve that you have left me in mid-ocean, so to say, would you? That will not be good for you.'

Khader did not look up. 'Look here, there is nothing you have to feel sorry for. The man spoke to you so sweetly, you were tempted, and that's all there is to it. You are not the only one to think the grass on the other side is greener, the other situation better, it is only natural. You have worked very loyally for me, and you don't have to be afraid I'll think less of you now. I'll dismiss this affair as a bad dream. You know me, I don't think one thing, and do something

else publicly. Go, wash your face, and do your work, as well as usual.'

Khader opened the door and went out quickly. Pillai told himself, 'He is a good boy. Somebody confused him by dangling temptation in front of him. People just won't let someone do a good job and come up in life.'

The next morning at nine, Vallinayagam Pillai called his shop to give instructions to his accountant. 'Send someone to get the bales from the lorry office. Ask Khader to mark the prices on the Puliangudi saris.' The accountant replied that Khader had not yet turned up for work. When he arrived at the shop, Vallinayagam Pillai sent a messenger to look for Khader, but he reported back that Khader's room was locked. Pillai learnt that evening that Khader had gone off to Madras with Gopala Iyer to procure goods for the latter's shop.

In the beginning Gopala Iyer was full of enthusiasm. He furnished his shop in the style most in vogue, new fashion almirahs and desks, an array of ceiling fans, telephone, swivelling chair. The fans and the lights were on all the time, whether there were customers in the shop or not. 'You can't be turning switches on and off all the time. Turn the main switch on when the shop opens, and turn it off when we close,' were his instructions. My friend, Moolakkaruppatti Reddiar, who ran a restaurant adjacent to Gopala Iyer's shop used to laugh, as he wiped his armpits with a towel, 'The business is good in the restaurant, but you won't see a crowd here as my customers mill around in Gopala Iyer's shop, pretending to look at the clothes.'

Khader got along very well with Iyer. He did not wholeheartedly endorse some of Gopala Iyer's foolish notions, and he took complete responsibility for the working of the shop. He did the procurement. He paid out-of-town creditors promptly with cheques from Gopala Iyer. He supervised the work of the shop-attendants and did a bulk of it himself. He kept the accounts and made them available to the income tax and sales tax officials. Iyer had infinite trust in him, and he stopped worrying about the shop. He spent his time playing cards with cronies in the upstairs of Reddiar's restaurant. Once in a while he would look in, and Khader would always assure him, 'Don't have a care. I shall look after everything.' The shop made a good profit during the first year.

As time passed by Gopala Iyer lost track of what was really going on his shop, and became totally dependent on Khader for advice and counsel. He could answer queries from customers only if Khader was by his side. Khader alone could decide on outstanding payments. Gradually, Gopala Iyer realized that he had allowed himself to be relegated to a lesser position, and a feeling of inferiority began to grow in him.

One day, an out-of-town supplier came into the shop when Khader was not there. He said to Gopala Iyer, 'Oh, the proprietor is not here? I will come again, later.'

Gopala Iyer's face reddened, and he called out to the man who was leaving. 'Come here, who did you refer to as the proprietor?'

'Why, I was talking about the fair-coloured gentleman who always comes for procurement.'

Gopala Iyer asked him to come in. 'What did you come for?'

'To show some samples.'

'Let me see them.'

The supplier spread out the samples on Gopala Iyer's desk. Iyer gave them a cursory glance and asked the supplier to send two bales of each material. 'Which of these have you selected?'

'All of them.'

The supplier was surprised. 'Do you think all of them will move?'

'That is none of your business.'

'I just wanted to make sure. . .'

'That is all right. Write out the order.'

Fortunately, nearly half of the materials Iyer had ordered on impulse sold well, and he took great trouble to dispose of the rest. When customers came in he himself would display to them the materials he had personally ordered.

One afternoon, when Khader had gone out to lunch, one of the shop-boys complained to Gopala Iyer, 'When you are not here, brother Khader never displays the stocks you ordered, and won't let us show them to the customer either.'

Gopala Iyer thundered: 'Listen to me, all of you. You must show customers first only the materials I procured. I don't care whether you show the stuff he procured or not.' From then on Iyer did not leave his chair for a moment. He kept telling himself, 'See, what I will do to that fellow.' That year he went by himself for procurement. He found out in Godown Street in Madras that Khader always got a commission in cash for the goods he procured. He learnt this from a man from Tirunelveli who had worked for a big supplier, and was now in business for himself, running a restaurant. This man told Iyer that because his former proprietor refused to give Khader a separate commission, Khader had stopped procuring from him.

Gopala Iyer procured a large quantity of goods that time, at least twice as much as Khader would have. He was anxious to have them marked and priced in time for the festive season of Dipavali when everybody buys new clothes. So he sent the materials down to Nagercoil by special lorry, flew to Thiruvananthapuram himself, and took a taxi to his shop.

The sales that season were sensational. The shop was always so crowded that customers had to wait on the steps. Two days before Dipavali, one could hardly get into the shop, and people jostled one another to get in—it was as if alms were being given out at that place. Gopala Iyer stood beside his desk, and ordered coffee and tea and cold drinks which the servers constantly brought in and took away empties in a procession. Gopala Iyer was suddenly reminded of Dowlattram, and had an illusion that he was watching the shop. He addressed him in his thoughts. 'What are you staring at? The business is going on briskly, that is all. It is nothing you have not seen before. Thanks to God's grace, it is going well. Yes, it is all his grace, without which no one can succeed. Don't think all this is due to my ability, it is all his grace.'

Gopala Iyer continued to do the procurement himself. At stock-taking that year, he realized he had unsold stock worth fifty thousand rupees. He tried to restrict his procurement, but the wholesalers expressed surprise at his reduced orders. 'You used to order four and five thousand rupees worth of goods, and now you are just asking for a thousand or two.' The insinuation cut him to the quick, so he again ordered more goods than he could sell. He developed a great bitterness towards Khader who was shedding crocodile tears, though he had

mentally severed himself from Gopala Iyer a long time ago. Gopala Iyer thought Khader was constantly laughing at him secretly. He said to himself, 'Laugh all you want, fellow, my horoscope says my bad period will last only until July. See what happens then, the sky will be the limit.' After a few months, he began issuing postdated cheques. Not wanting to lose the custom that was still coming in, and to put some money in the bank to cover the cheques, he began selling his goods for whatever was offered. Even so, a cheque bounced and the news was all over Godown street within the hour. Agents started arriving in hordes in quest of their outstandings, wearing different faces, all former cordiality lost, and not bearing any sweets. They berated Gopala Iyer for lacking honesty and self-respect. The banks had no consideration for him either, and they stopped his credit, and filed court-cases against him. Iyer sold the lands he had mortgaged. Khader got him some money by pawning his wife's jewellery. Gopala Iyer stayed house-bound for fear of running into his creditors. The agents barricaded themselves outside his house from early morning, so that even if he had wanted to, he could not have come out of the house.

His friends advised him to sell the shop. He also thought it a good idea, before the situation deteriorated any further. At this point Khader made him an offer. He said that a Muslim gentleman from Melappalayam, who had made his money in Colombo, was willing to buy the shop, and also take Khader on as partner. Gopala Iyer agreed. It was decided that a first instalment of twenty-five thousand rupees would be paid to him, followed by monthly payments of seven hundred rupees plus interest for the following twenty-three months. The deal was struck. Gopala Iyer went back to

Mahadanapuram. It was public knowledge in a few days that Khader was the sole owner of the shop, and that he had paid the entire first instalment from his own funds.

Abdul Khader was now a proprietor. His goal had been attained. It struck him all over again that leaving Vallinayagam Pillai and joining Gopala Iyer was the wisest thing he could have done. He kept marvelling at his own foresight and keen intelligence.

CHAPTER NINE

Abdul Khader's stationery shop at the Tamarind Tree Junction came to him through his wife. His youthful dream about marrying a rich man's daughter had come true.

Janab Abdul Azeez, who had gone from Kalakkad to Singapore as a young man, returned home in his fiftieth year, a very rich man. He wanted to spend the rest of his life in leisurely retirement and made several plans to that effect. But having been extremely active since his early years, he soon began to think of retirement as some sort of a punishment, and he decided to invest some of his money, buying vacant plots at the Tamarind Tree Junction, quite sure that as time went by, they would increase in value. So he bought from Nilakantan Potti some land at eighty rupees a cent. Now the thought occurred to him to build a shop on the land and rent it out. Even while the shop was under construction, several people went to him at Kalakkad, wanting to rent it when finished, and he realized how prestigious the locality had become. Instead of sitting and doing nothing, why shouldn't he open a shop himself, was the thought that came to him one day. That is what he did. When the shop was ready, he stocked it with a minimum of items—looking in from the outside one could not tell whether the shop was functioning or was vacant—and took his seat as proprietor. Spending time at the Tamarind Tree Junction was of course no problem for Janab Azeez. Newspapers arrived in the morning and evening. Boys were

available to go on errands. The military (non-vegetarian) restaurant was just two doors away. His Muslim League friends were always ready and available to discuss politics.

But his business did not flourish. His politics was one reason. The first thing one saw on entering his shop was a large portrait of Janab Mohammed Ali Jinnah, President of the Muslim League, and that was enough to turn nationalists away from the shop. He tried reducing his prices but that did not help. He was not a thoughtful conversationalist. He would constantly sing praises of Singapore to the detriment of India, much like a husband extolling the merits of his first wife to his second wife. It did not help either.

It was at this juncture that Janab Azeez got to know Abdul Khader. He went to Khader's shop to buy some clothes, and an acquaintance developed between the two. Janab Azeez was greatly impressed by Khader's business skills and lively manners. He started going to Khader's shop whenever he had some free time. When Khader asked for a loan to cover a shortfall in his bank, Janab Azeez obliged thinking that Khader was a co-religionist. Later, when Khader wanted another loan, with two months' time to return it, again Janab Azeez let him have the money, though somewhat reluctantly, but just a few days later, Khader sent him a promissory note, including interest on the sum he had borrowed. Janab Azeez was very pleased and impressed, especially when Khader promptly returned the money at the end of the period agreed upon. After a couple of such dealings, they set up the transaction on strictly business terms, and Khader never failed to live up to his word, and returned the loans promptly when due. Janab Azeez would laugh loudly in pleasure, saying, 'You must return it always on the due date,

mustn't you? Otherwise I will put a black mark against you, you think?' And would put the money away happily.

When he went to Kalakkad for the weekends, it became an obsessive habit with him to sing Khader's praises to his wife. She knew quite well what her husband had in his mind, and merely wondered if Khader was really as handsome as her husband made him out to be.

One morning, Khader came to see Janab Azeez, urgently and in some excitement. He said, 'I have come to consult you on a plan,' and proceeded to explain what it was. Representatives of the Bombay Quality Tobacco Company were in town, looking for wholesalers for their product, the Camel brand cigarette. They had already had several offers. Khader wanted Janab Azeez to talk to the Agency, and Azeez firmly declined, saying he could not do it. Khader persisted. 'Uncle, don't think twice about it, you won't get such a fine opportunity again. If you work hard at it for two years, the money will come pouring in.'

Janab Azeez refused to be persuaded. 'I can't possibly take on something like this at my age. You will have to advertise. You will have to go to shop after shop to get orders, and you will need sub-agents. Will have to rent a warehouse. Will have to flatter all sorts of fellows. Not for me all this bother.'

Khader did not give up. He said, 'Uncle, a good product will soon find its level in the market, and sell briskly. All of Malabar will buy only Camel, and won't look at any other brand.'

'That's all very well for you to say, but smokers are fickle-minded. Suddenly they may switch from Camel to horse, and we will be following this Camel to the desert.'

'Uncle, please don't make a joke of it. Just say yes. You don't have to move from this chair, I shall do the negotiating. Just keep some money ready. If you invest in this business, don't you see you will be able to give jobs to ten or twelve of our people? If you let this chance go, people will sneer that you are fit only for selling soap and combs and mirrors.'

Janab Azeez said, 'Khader, you are so eager about the agency, then why don't you take it yourself?'

'Now, you are laughing at me. If I had the resources, wouldn't I have taken it myself, not even told you about it?'

'Come on, you can't lack money, don't try to fool me.'

'Look at your own ledger, and you will see how often I have to come to you for money. If I take money away from the business, there will only be a blank there.'

After a brief pause, Janab Azeez said, 'In that case why don't you do something? Take up the Agency, and I'll lend you the money.'

Khader was stunned and asked unbelievably, 'Are you serious?'

Janab Azeez said, 'I am absolutely serious. You decide yourself how long you are likely to take returning the money, and give me a promissory note to that effect. I'll give you the money, and you can pay whatever interest you can, we won't discuss it.'

'What are you saying?'

'Don't ask me again and again what I am saying. What more is there to say? You say you will take the agency if you have money. I say I will give you the money. There is no more to be said.'

Khader asked, 'What will I do for a shop?' and

Janab Azeez replied briefly that Khader could have his shop. 'What about you?'

Janab Azeez said, 'I'll sit in a corner of the shop. What do I have here that cannot be packed in two suitcases.'

When he left the shop, Khader could hardly walk on the road. His feet felt like they were stepping on foam. He suddenly thought of his father. His unceasing prayers must have brought him this good fortune. Khader's eyes were full of tears as his father's face flitted across his mind.

Khader concluded the business successfully. He took the tobacco company representatives that night to the Cosmopolitan Hotel in Cape Comorin, where he feted them grandly. This was a smart move on his part by which he cut out his contenders who were no longer in the running for the agency. At the hotel, he looked after every need of the representatives without asking them any questions, and they thought he was not just a pleasant fellow, but also a very active and capable person, who would work hard to make the business a success. However, after they had discussed the business thoroughly, they insisted that he should make a deposit with his own funds, and wanted to see his bank passbook. Khader was stunned. This was a death blow. He said, 'My uncle is financing the business. Isn't that enough?'

'Is he your own uncle?'

'He is my mother's cousin, and is like a father to me. I consult him on every matter, and do as he suggests.' The people who had come with the representative spoke up in support of Khader, but the representative was adamant. Khader asked for twenty-four hours to provide evidence of his financial viability, and returned to town.

Khader went to see Janab Azeez the next morning, and in reply to his query said, 'It is all practically settled. The agreement has to be prepared. They have so many documents that it looks like I may have to sign a hundred times.'

Then Janab Azeez said, 'Khader, there is something else I want to talk to you about.' Khader asked him what it was about, and Janab Azeez said, 'You know, ever since I got to know you, I have been talking about you frequently at home. Your name would pop out of my mouth without my even thinking about it. So much so my wife asked me whether I proposed to make you my son-in-law, since I talk about you all the time. And I told her, perhaps I do. She has obviously taken this seriously, and to cut a long story short she wants the wedding to take place this year.'

Khader said, 'What is all this, uncle, this crazy talk?' He went on, 'Our boys are now getting BA and MA degrees, and you should be able to find a fine groom by spending ten or twenty thousand rupees.'

'Khader, I also made my money in business. If you think less of yourself because you are in business, remember, I will have to think less of myself also.'

Khader was lost in thought. Janab Azeez asked him, 'Are you thinking you should see the girl?'

Khader looked shocked. 'Uncle, you are suggesting something that is not our custom.'

Janab Azeez replied, 'Put all that aside. Don't talk to me about our benighted community. Are you under the impression that my daughter wears a veil? Can you name any one of our people who took wife and children by ship to another country? I did, thirty years ago. Our community was totally opposed. I said, off with you, you dirty beggars, your

sons-in-law and your nephews are chasing Chinese women, over there. My daughter grew up in that country. If I tell her Khader is here, she will bring you tea, and take all of you in one glance. That is the kind of girl she is.'

Khader went to Kalakkad that evening. He hated the girl's looks. She would have been beautiful if she had taken after her handsome father. She would not have been so ugly if she had taken even after her mother. Khader thought of his mother. He remembered the naked body of the girl he had been attracted to at the float festival, and had gained a night's possession of by giving fifty rupees to the mother. He thought of all the beautiful girls, their faces and lovely limbs, he had had since then. Grief rose in him like a wave and choked his throat. He sat, silent and unmoving on a three-legged stool in the back of his shop. A telephone call from Cape Comorin reminded him of business. He obtained time until the following morning and rushed to Janab Azeez, and told him about the tobacco company representative's condition for giving him the agency. Janab Azeez was silent for a few moments, and then said, 'Khader, there is nothing to be concerned about. I will give you a bank passbook by ten tomorrow morning.'

'What?'

'A passbook in your name. We have become family now, haven't we? Get along with you.' Khader did not know what to say, could not open his mouth. He sat still and unmoving. 'Khader, do you like my daughter?' asked Janab Azeez. Khader did not reply.

Abdul Khader had arrived at the Tamarind Tree Junction.

CHAPTER TEN

The news of Damu's arrest was prominently published on the front page of the *Travancore Nesan*, and had the town agog. In the evenings, politically-inclined young men, and freedom fighters who had veered away from current trends discussed the news and rumours in every conceivable place—at the Tamarind Tree Junction, in front of Lala's sweet shop near the clock tower, in the Vadaseri marketplace, and on the banks of the Kottar—and speculated about the dire consequences that were sure to follow. Damu had his own political backing, considerable stature as the secretary of the paan merchants' association, and the support of his own community, which, though small in numbers, was highly disciplined; and local political prophets, meeting in small groups, predicted doom and dire disaster. The news spread around the next day that with the support of the paan merchants' association, a strike and a shutdown would be organized, and that a condemnation meeting would be held in the corporation grounds. It was also reported that an emergency meeting of the paan merchants' executive would be held at midnight, and cars had been to Trivandrum to bring back the local legislator who had gone to attend the Assembly session. It was also said that Abdul Khader's showcase had been smashed to smithereens within an hour of Damu's arrest, but this was later denied and dismissed as a rumour, but Khader's not coming to the shop for two or three days provoked much derision. It was almost

as if every one felt a secret satisfaction at the tension that had taken hold of the town. On the third day after his arrest Damu came out on bail. Nearly five hundred paan merchants received him when he came out of the court, garlanded him and took him away.

I was fifteen or sixteen when these events occurred in our town. It was a time when I was in a state of disappointment that I had played no part in the freedom movement. Perhaps because of this, along with my friends I was deeply interested in the Damu affair, and every bit of news relating to it. I invited myself to join the adult groups that discussed the event in the bazaar, and did not mind the indifference of my elders to my presence. I was eager to gather information that my friends were not aware of, and pass it on to them before anyone else. I studied the faces of the older people when they were discussing these subjects, and wore similar expressions while talking to my friends and passing on to them what I had heard as if they were my own views. At that age, it seemed very necessary for me to believe that I was a very responsible person who was deeply worried by the deteriorating situation. So I gathered information little by little about the origin of the enmity between Khader and Damu, and the ways in which it had displayed itself. When I was elaborating on the topic to my sisters, I always exaggerated the details a bit, making up stories to match what might have happened or what I wished had happened, and felt a deep satisfaction. As I am telling you these stories now, several years later, I cannot say that I am wholly free from the tendency to modify them a bit here and there. If it is impossible to let imagination take over reality, it does seem possible to let reality be slightly coloured by imagination. All our efforts seem like so many

attempts to cut one's foot to fit the shoe. It does not really matter. Call it art and it is condoned. Everyone knows how to enjoy fiction as if it were reality for the moment, and later retain the sense of enjoyment while rejecting the fiction.

Damu was one of five brothers. Their home town was Kulithalai. The children became orphans when their widowed mother, who was under treatment by physician Nanu for stomach-ache, ran away with him. The disgrace of her having run away with a low-caste man was intense. Damu stopped a lorry from the nearby estate, bundled himself and his four brothers into it, and came to Nagercoil, as I understood it. Chellappan was the eldest. I knew only three of them. Chellappan had no interest outside of minding the shop. Damu was an August patriot, having taken part in the Quit India movement. He was belaboured by the police for refusing to remove his headwear at the clock tower junction. It was after this incident that he became well-known in the town. It was considered a patriotic action to buy fruit from his shop for a coin. Students would pass a number of shops just to be able to go to his.

I had another reason to be secretly excited by the family—Chellappan and Damu shared the same wife. This arrangement filled me with an unaccountable sense of novelty and thrill. I had also heard that elders commended the arrangement as wise as it would help not split the family income. I also gathered that the arrangement did not in any way disrupt the family life. There were no shutters in Damu's shop, and when Gandhiji was assassinated, they covered the front with a black cloth to give the impression that they were also closed. I believe it was the first time the shop was closed since it was opened.

The two brothers alternated day and night duty between themselves. Sukumaran, the youngest brother who was in my class at school, told me that his sister-in-law told him that the only time the brothers were seen together was when they all had to go to Palani to have the head of one of the children ritually shaved. I moved very closely with Sukumaran as I wanted to get to know more and more about their household. I remember vividly the time I went to their house to borrow Savarkar's Volcano, and had a glimpse of his sister-in-law. She was enormously fat. Sukumar said, 'Both my brothers compete in feeding her and she is a good eater.' The brothers had made strict arrangements to prevent other people from watching her eat. She had also begun drinking, as she said, for medicinal purposes, Sukumaran told me. 'Whenever brother Damu asked her if she did not know that Gandhiji had forbidden drinking, she would say that it applied to men only,' said Sukumaran. Some of the children resembled Chellappan, and some Damu. Children who resembled the mother scampered all over the house, looking like so many puzzles. In those days whenever I saw the children, I used to feel pity and surprise. With the wisdom of later years, one realized that the fact of chastity cannot be established to suit one's assumptions, that only the mother is proof positive of one's parentage, that one had only the word of a mother to determine the father.

Damu's business flourished, and there was always a small crowd of people in front of his shop. If the adjacent shop sold plantains at eight to the coin, in Damu's shop it was six to the coin, and no haggling was allowed. If somebody mentioned the prices in the adjacent shop, the brothers would simply say, 'Why don't you do your shopping there, in that

case?' However big the crowd of customers, and however urgent their needs might be, the brothers would take their own time delivering the goods with an air of studied indifference, a trait they shared. All the same it remained the most popular shop in the street, and though the brothers did not say so openly, both felt their success was due to 'her good-luck', meaning their common wife. The main attraction of the Tamarind Tree Junction was in fact Damu's shop.

The only other shop in the area, which did even better business than Damu's, was Khader's. It was in an auspicious moment that Janab Azeez transferred his shop to Khader, who dealt in stationery wholesale and retail, and the business grew day by day. He sold his cloth-shop and goodwill for a very good profit, and invested the money in his new shop. He was not really interested in making profit for its own sake, what interested him was to keep the shop bustling and active all day, and he sold his goods for very reasonable prices. When he closed shop at night, the day's collection would usually be around two to three thousand rupees. He was indifferent to how much of it was profit.

Khader and his wife and Janab Abdul Azeez rented a bungalow in Kottar. Even during the early weeks of his marriage, Khader developed a violent aversion to his wife. Her body revolted him. He began to wish fervently that she might die. He wanted to be rid of the burden, marry someone attractive, and live happily ever after, but he also knew that the fairy tale ending was not to be. The arguments and the fights between husband and wife turned out to be a daily affair. Unable to bear watching Khader beat his heavily pregnant wife, Janab Azeez packed up and went back to Kalakkad. His first wife had recently died, and he married a

second time to fend off loneliness. When Khader met Janab Azeez's new wife he was torn by envy and despair. He screamed at his wife, 'How can an old so-and-so get such a beautiful wife?' and beat her up demanding that she bring Janab Azeez's wife to his house. Bibi, his wife, was by now accustomed to his drunken behaviour, and had reached a stage where she could not shed a tear even if her eye was pricked.

His failed marriage however proved to be a boon to his business as he spent most of his time in the shop. He developed a positive frenzy for work, and laboured as if he were avenging himself on someone. He did not want any rest, he was positively afraid of the thought of having nothing to do, and kept making fresh work for himself. Drinking made him sleep well at night. He took pleasure in the thought that though he considered himself the most unfortunate of persons, others thought him very lucky. He would complain to his friends with a put-on worried expression that the other traders in the bazaar were envious of him, though this pleased him a good deal inwardly. He wanted to gain further successes just to make his detractors squirm in envy. He had also heard that not knowing any way to better him in business, they had taken to talking offensively about him as the man who had cheated Gopala Iyer. In the meantime, Gopala Iyer had died, and Khader started sending fifty rupees every month to his family. Without fail, his servant would take the money to Mahadanapuram on the first of every month. People in the Brahmin street said it was more money than the family could have hoped for if Gopala Iyer had been alive. Gopala Iyer's wife started praising Khader for his generosity to all and sundry. Khader deserved all the praise for very few

persons who swindle someone else are so good to his family.

It was the cigarette agency that his father-in-law helped him obtain which was responsible for his status, it must be said. Gone were the days when the merits of Camel brand cigarette were extolled and blared through loudspeakers mounted on lorries to festival crowds and in marketplaces, and the cigarettes distributed free. Now every paan-shop owner from Parvathipuram to Anaippalam fought for the privilege of stocking Camel brand cigarettes. The demand for the cigarettes from the shopkeepers who crowded around him went to Khader's head. The equanimity that he always showed when talking to people deserted him. He started turning away persons who had come from long distances for a stock of the cigarettes on flimsy excuses. He gave them arbitrary timings when they might secure their stock. He would say, 'Is it easy to buy gold? You have to wait patiently for your stock,' and he repeated this endlessly every day like a mantra. As the days passed, and paan-keepers who were turned away empty-handed by Khader started going back to Khader along with Damu. Khader secretly feared Damu, a known trouble-maker. He wanted to keep him as a friend rather than make an enemy of him.

Once Damu had come to Khader's shop to speak up for a small trader named Arumugham. In the state of mind he was in that day, Khader decided not to give in to Damu, and he said to Damu, 'He may be your brother-in-law, so I should go to the store and bring out the stock myself? Let the servant come.' Damu raised his hand to strike Khader but the accountant got in between the two, and saved Khader from a beating. Khader had not carefully thought out what he said to Damu. The words had come tumbling

out because of his long-standing frustration and anger with Damu, who in turn was infuriated by Khader's veiled reference to the fact that Arumugham's widowed sister was his mistress. The air was tense and Khader tried a conciliatory tack. He said, 'Arumugham has some back payment to make. Let him settle it, and I will give him fresh stocks.'

Damu asked, 'Can people who have no back-payment to make get fresh stocks?'

Khader said, 'It is up to me.' Damu gave him a furious look and left the shop. When Janab Azeez heard about this episode he made a special trip from Kalakkad, stood in front of Khader's shop—Khader was away then—and without mentioning any names, started abusing 'the beggars'. He flayed Damu's community in a roundabout fashion, belittlingly, and went back to Kalakkad by the evening bus. He was so upset that he did not even stop to see his daughter.

The bitterness between Khader and Damu arose from this incident, and increased during subsequent acrimonious encounters. They clashed constantly in varying degrees of severity. Though once I had made a careful collection of the episodes that concerned the enmity between the two, I have forgotten most of them now, except the one I am about to relate.

When prohibition was imposed in our town, it became difficult to obtain foreign liquor, and many had to go to Quilon (which is in another state) to buy bottles. Whenever he could not go himself, Khader used to send his coolie Ayyappan to obtain supplies. On one occasion Damu caught Ayyappan with the goods in front of Khader's shop and turned him over to the police, with the bottles as evidence. In retaliation, Khader spread the story that Damu used to buy liquor from him for his wife's use, and a couple of times he had to refuse him. Which was why

he was trying to implicate him, Khader, in the case. He embellished his story further. 'He would appeal to me pathetically that unless he showed a bottle through the window, his wife would not let him into the house, and I always obliged. It is all my own fault, but for how many days could brother Damu sleep on the outside platform?' he would say insinuatingly to Damu's friends.

In response, Damu would roar, 'I won't rest until I see him again sitting in a shop-front and rolling bidis,' and beat his breast. 'His father was a sweeper in the mosque. Now he drives around in a car, sitting grandly in the backseat. No wonder he is getting to be so arrogant.'

A smouldering fire will sooner or later burst into flame, and the enmity between the two, hitherto limited to the occasional skirmish and verbal attacks, exploded publicly one day. Cigarette prices went up just before the budget session in Parliament, the commodity became rare in the market, and its price kept going up. Long before Khader opened his shop, the small traders who retailed his cigarette in their shops would converge at the Tamarind Tree Junction. Khader reduced the supply of cigarettes suddenly. It occurred to him that here was a good opportunity to collect overdues and back-payments, and he announced that he would supply only to those who had completely settled their outstandings. Everybody owed him a hundred or two hundred rupees, and they certainly could not rustle up that much cash at short notice. One day, when a huge crowd of traders was milling outside Khader's shop for his largesse, Damu showed up on the scene, and announced, 'I will get you the stocks. Follow me,' and stormed up the stairway to the upper floor of Khader's shop. Making a great clatter, the traders clambered up

behind him on the wooden steps. Khader called the police, while some people controlled Damu and stopped him from doing worse. By the time the police arrived, the traders had disappeared. The police inspector was a friend of Khader. After chasing away the riff-raff that was watching the goings-on, he told Khader, 'If you have any sense, you will transfer the stock to another location. Don't be a fool.' He left, after proffering the advice secretly. The same night the upstairs rooms were cleared out. The next morning, when the traders assembled again, Khader flung his keys on his desk, and told them, 'Take what you want.' He sent two packets of cigarette to Damu, and said to the traders, 'He just wants it all for himself. Do you think he is interested in your getting supplies? When I say, shouldn't I give them at least half, he says no, give it all to me.' But nothing could shake the faith the paan-merchants had in Damu.

Damu engaged a good lawyer to defend coolie Ayyappan who was now in jail, and he did so by a proxy as he did not want his connection on with the case known. When Ayyappan was released, Damu took him to his shop. This was a smart move, for Ayyappan had served Khader for many years, and was privy to all his secrets, which Damu now hoped to get out of him, and felt it was just as well to have Ayyappan come over to his side. Ayyappan was already furious that Khader had not arranged bail for him, and had decided to join Damu as soon as he was released. When he learnt that it was Damu who had arranged for his defence, his regard for Damu grew immeasurably. Ayyappan was released as the case for the prosecution was weak.

When he came out of jail, Ayyappan went straight to Khader's shop walked into it, lighting a cigarette as he entered. With the cigarette hanging

from his lips, he stood in front of Khader and said, 'She wants a tin of talcum powder.'

Khader looked up, surprised by Ayyappan's insolent manner. 'Who?' he asked.

'Rani,' replied the coolie Ayyappan.

'Which Rani?'

'Rani from east street. Remember I brought her to the Puliakkurichi travellers bungalow one day?' Khader's face fell in humiliation. He did not respond, but pretended to be looking at his account books. The shop attendants were puzzled by the exchange, and came closer to the desk, not wanting to miss anything.

Ayyappan continued, 'Parameswari, Chellammai, Krishnammai, Pankajam, all of them want tins of talcum powder. They say, your proprietor dirtied my face, so get me some talcum powder to put on it.' Khader looked up and frowned. 'Mangala street Mary—I told you she was a shrew—she wants two tins.' The attendants quietly went back to their places. Khader said nothing, but got up and went upstairs, a shattered expression on his face.

Ayyappan was now a permanent fixture in Damu's shop. When a few of his friends gathered in front of his shop, Damu would ask Ayyappan to tell them what he went to ask for in Khader's shop—oil? comb? Ayyappan would then narrate his encounter with Khader, and at each repetition Damu would laugh uproariously, as if he was hearing the story for the first time. He would slap Ayyappan affectionately on the back and call him an impertinent fellow, and Ayyappan would happily accept the blow as a tribute. When the friends departed, Damu would throw a half-rupee coin at the coolie Ayyappan and ask him to go and get some coffee. This became a routine.

The working committee of the paan merchants' association called an emergency meeting when Khader reduced the supply of cigarettes. Damu made a passionate speech at the meeting. When it was proposed that the association should send a warning letter to Khader, he rejected the idea as cowardly and an insult to the association's self-respect. He also turned down another suggestion that a select group from the committee should call on Khader. He held out for informing the Bombay headquarters of the cigarette company about what was going on, and asking them to send a representative to see for himself Khader's excesses, and having the agency taken away from Khader. He defended his recommendation with vigour. His question, should we bow down to a minor merchant when we wouldn't do so to the great British empire, was received with acclamation and approbation. He said he did not personally covet the agency, but he would lay his life down, if necessary, to get the agency for any other member of the association, whereupon the president, Rajapandia Nadar, protested that Damu was hurting the feelings of the members since no one suspected him of having designs, and Damu duly expressed regret. He said his weakness was he tended to become too emotional and apologized again.

The association sent a telegram to the cigarette company in Bombay, signed by nearly three hundred traders. Within twenty-four hours the company wired back to say it was sending a representative to look into their grievances. Khader went to the Thiruvananthapuram airport to meet the representative. Damu, his colleagues, and Isakki, correspondent of the *Travancore Nesan*, also came to the airport, and garlanded the representative on behalf of their association.

The inquiry was held in the upstairs of Khader's shop. The traders, one by one, made their depositions in a private room. The representative duly noted every one's grievances in his notebook. Damu said that Khader had not really sold the stocks as he indicated in his account books, but was actually keeping them in secret godowns. He asked for two days in which to try and locate where the stocks were hidden. The inquiry was over.

Khader was very happy that his accounts could not in any way be faulted. With his accountant he had cooked them up, working day and night, before the arrival of the representative, and he was delighted that his efforts had not failed. The representative warned him that he should not use the agency to collect overdue debts, and he agreed. He promised that such errors would not be repeated by him or his staff. It seemed as though the entire affair would conclude with a warning letter from the company to him.

But that evening around six, the representative who was sitting in Khader's shop, smoking a cheroot and watching the Tamarind Tree Junction, suddenly said, 'Khader, how about going to Cape Comorin?' Khader said, of course, and picked up his phone to send for his car but the representative said, 'Let us not go in your car, as the situation is bad, and we shouldn't give room for any talk.' He came out of the shop, clapped his hands, and immediately a taxi rolled alongside. When Khader and the representative had taken their seats in the back of the car, the coolie Ayyappan came from Damu's shop and took a seat beside the driver. Khader yelled at him to get off the car, but the driver claimed that Ayyappan was his cleaner. 'What do we care? Let him stay,' said the representative. When the taxi passed

the Kottaram orchards, it came to a halt in front of a dilapidated building. Khader asked the driver why he had stopped there but the driver did not reply. The representative said to Khader, 'Follow me quietly,' got out of the car, and went up the steps of the building which was locked. He said to Khader, 'Take out the key and open it.' Khader hesitated. 'The matter is between us now. If you don't open the door the company has authorized me to send for the police. Be sensible.' Khader opened the door.

On the third day, the company announced that Khader had been divested of the agency. The paan merchants' association publicized the event through the *Travancore Nesan*. For three days Khader stayed in an upstairs room in the Cosmopolitan Hotel, stupefying himself with alcohol, and rolling over and over on the bed. When he returned to his shop on the fourth day, he saw a sign, Camel Brand Cigarettes—Wholesalers, hanging in Damu's shop.

The state of affairs being such between Khader and Damu, no one can really blame Khader for thinking that Damu must have been behind the smashing of his shop-sign. When he reported his suspicions to the police they gave him the impression of taking his complaint very seriously, but Damu's friends believed among themselves that the police were just using the episode to wreak vengeance on Damu who had been a thorn in their side for many years. Damu had treated the police with contempt during the freedom struggle. Not only that, everybody in the bazaar knew that policemen could not get free fruits or bidis from Damu's shop.

When the municipality's complaint reached the police, the inspector called on the municipal chairman, who told the inspector about his

suspicious, that the scavengers might have been behind the stealing of fruit from the tamarind tree.

The police fabricated two cases. One that it was the scavengers who threw stones at the tamarind tree and collected the fruits that came down, and two, utilizing the opportunity and expecting that the scavengers would be blamed for smashing Khader's signboard also, Damu arranged for it to be done. The police also decided that the coolie Ayyappan must have done the actual smashing.

When Damu came out on bail, the police arrested Comrade Madasami, scavenger-leader, who had been working, along with lawyer Janardhanam, for the welfare of scavengers. They also arrested Madasami's wife, who provided solid support to her husband by enlisting scavenger-women as members of their association. As she was heavily pregnant and expecting the child to be born any time now, she was taken by ambulance to the government maternity hospital, and left in the custody of a policewoman. A week later she delivered a healthy baby without any fuss.

A warrant was issued against the coolie Ayyappan, but he had decamped and no one knew his whereabouts.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Through the efforts of Janardhanam, a young lawyer and prominent labour leader, Madasami came out on bail, and the same evening a meeting was held in the municipal grounds to condemn the repressive measures of the police. There was no effort to get Madasami's wife out on bail, as the lawyer felt she needed the post-delivery care the hospital was providing her. The *Travancore Nesan* reported that lawyer Janardhanam had warned at the public meeting that if the cases against the Madasami couple were not withdrawn, the scavengers would consider going on a total strike. The report was obviously that of Isakki, the regular correspondent of the newspaper. The two columns the story occupied were peppered repeatedly with the phrase, 'the fire of revolution', and it seemed as if the writer had had a fire-engine by his side while writing his piece.

Earlier, the scavengers' union had submitted to the municipality a memorandum demanding a pay raise. The *Travancore Nesan* further reported that at the meeting lawyer Janardhanam had also said that anticipating that the scavengers might go on a strike to press their demand, and wanting to nip it in the bud, the authorities had arrested the Madasami couple, the backbone of the scavengers' union, to remove them from the scene. The charge, true or false, was credible all right. One could not say what mischief an irresolute municipality was capable of.

Out of sheer fear, it was capable of committing heinous sins.

The police had a dragnet out for coolie Ayyappan, but he had disappeared altogether. Khader's signboard had been smashed, Madasami's wife had given birth to a child under the auspices of government, lawyer Janardhanam and Madasami continued their fiery speeches, duly reported in *Travancore Nesan*, other events had occurred, time passed, and yet after five or six weeks the police were unable to locate the scamp Ayyappan, and became a laughing-stock among the people. Many believed that coolie Ayyappan passed through the village of Kadukkaral and took the secret hill-route to Pondi in Tirunelveli district, and that it would be impossible to find him unless the Pondi police cooperated with the Travancore police. Others said, as if they had successfully solved a mystery, that he must have taken the ship to Sri Lanka. Damu must surely have had a role in spiriting coolie Ayyappan away, some thought; Damu the intrepid who had the intelligence, ability and courage to accomplish anything he wanted. I think the *Travancore Nesan* published an advertisement announcing a reward for information about coolie Ayyappan, but I do not actually remember seeing it.

After ten years people were again beginning to talk about Damu, even as they had done during the August struggle, when praise for him was on everybody's lips. His courage then was the talk of the town. Wouldn't any one, when ordered by a police officer (D.S.P. Achyuthan Nair, I think) to remove his turban, not have done so? After all, he is not ordering you to cut your throat. What happened next was watched by the crowd that had gathered at the clock-tower junction. It was ten in the morning. Four

sub-inspectors knocked Damu to the ground, kicked him with his boot as if he were a football. That he refused to remove his turban till the end is a fact, no exaggeration. When the pain was more than he could bear, he started rolling around and his turban came off, but that is a different matter. The story that he crawled across the cement road, vomiting blood and tried to retie his turban is the exaggeration. I have heard it from those who were there; that until he lost consciousness he kept shouting, *Bharat Mata ki jai* (victory to Mother India), and made no effort to retie his turban. After this incident, when any one said, August patriot, everybody knew he was referring to Damu. For young people he was the beau ideal, and there was no one in town to compare with him. The turban also became a permanent fixture on his head. He always wore it when he met with small groups, when he addressed public meetings or presided over them. Some of my classmates said that Damu unfurled his turban and wrapped it around his waist as a sign of reverence only when he passed by a picture of Mahatma Gandhi. I don't think that was true. People tend to build myths whenever a suitable subject presents itself.

When the country became free, Damu, however, felt he was lost in a vacuum, that his name and fame were losing their original sheen. People's memories fade fast, faster than it takes to arouse their passions. When someone might ask 'Who is M. K. Gandhi?' any day now, it was not surprising that they should forget his name, but he was saddened and felt a sense of loss, all the same. What is fame? Is it not the pleasure one feels at the awareness that one is known even to people one has never heard of? Only those who have experienced it know what a great pleasure it is. As one is walking along the road and hears a

stranger behind him tell a friend softly who one is, that is pleasure. When one's speech is published in the newspaper along with a photograph, one is in seventh heaven. There are not many among us who can act as if they have renounced everything. Nothing can substitute for the pleasure one feels when one is garlanded, or receives applause. Damu had experienced such pleasure. His one regret was that he had never been drawn by a cartoonist, it was an unfulfilled desire. He had, however, made some clothes his trade mark and had developed some special gestures and expressions, so that a cartoonist would not have any problem drawing him distinctively when the time came and he was a big star in the political firmament. As he was dreaming dreams of greatness, the country became free, and he, along with others who had participated in the freedom struggle, became expendable, just ordinary citizens of a free country. Damu felt that the people generally felt a sense of loss, a sense of disappointment they could not understand. Nobody seemed to know what to do next. Damu felt the world had come to a stop. A hankering tongue needs something tasty to work on. Now it looked as if his own wife would not shout a jai for him, even if he paid her.

Damu developed a socialist way of thinking, which in turn increased his critical faculty, and helped maintain the tradition of struggle. India may be free but there is more work ahead, and as if the great task of preparing the country for revolution was his sole responsibility, he would speak on the subject with both concern and anger. As the days passed, he realized he was making no headway in retrieving his past glory. A great depression came over him, and having no other recourse, he went back to the

business. His brother, Chellappan, was overjoyed. Under their joint supervision the business flourished. The money came rolling in. For quite some time, Damu sat behind the cash counter in the shop, without fretting too much. When the paan merchants' association was formed, he became its secretary at the insistence of friends. Though he fully immersed himself in the business, and began to realize that the pleasures money could bring were no less than other kinds, he would every now and again remember the old days nostalgically and indulge in self-pity. He would then tell any one who happened to be around, 'Politics has reached a very low level. It wasn't like this then. There was prestige, a status . . .' and feel a mild self-satisfaction. His days rolled on thus.

Damu had never expected that he would regain his former fame and glory, although in another form. One can call this nothing but luck. He thundered at the meeting in the municipality grounds, 'I will bring to book, not just Khader but a thousand black marketeers like him.' The time was ripe for his comeback. He had never expected to be received by so many merchants and garlanded when he came out of the court. He thrilled all over. It seemed to him that Mother India was beckoning to him benignly, 'Come back to me.' His heart fluttered.

His friends who were his fans thought his speech that day surpassed any other. He spoke somewhat boisterously; it had been a long time since he had had the opportunity to talk in such a full-throated fashion, and he made the most of it. For instance, though he had no good reason to talk about the scavenger crisis, he wantonly declared that if the municipality played monkey-tricks with the scavengers, then the present chairman, M. C. Joseph, would lose his deposit in the coming elections, and would have to vacate his chair for Comrade

Madasami. When he talked about the atrocities perpetrated by proprietors of businesses, many felt that he did not have to name them, which he did. He thundered that he knew the secret storing places of a hundred businessmen, and challenged the police whether they were ready to raid them. He warned Nehru, who, he said, had given the impression that he was a socialist, but was now closely hobnobbing with the right wing, that his days in politics were numbered. When he instructed the C.I.D. (police) who were covering the meeting to make a special note of his point about Nehru and send it to their headquarters, the audience applauded vigorously. I was among those who heard him talk that day, and I remember that the word 'death-knell' occurred frequently in his speech.

It was Damu's day again. He thought that this was the golden period of his life. The speed with which he made money after he obtained the cigarette agency surprised him. When he got the agency, he heard that some of the paan merchants, though friends of his, were muttering suspicions against him. He had expected that when he betrayed Khader, he would be accused of acting in self-interest, and that he would be criticized in that score. But when he was suddenly arrested one day, he became the hero who exposed black-marketeers, and received public acclaim and praise, all criticism against him was stilled.

Meetings were organized here and there in Travancore in honour of Damu. The *Travancore Nesan* gave excellent publicity to the meetings. The word went around that Damu might contest in the forthcoming municipal elections and become chairman without any effort. It was also said that Madasami would stand for election from a ward.

CHAPTER TWELVE

It was only ten in the morning but the day was already blisteringly hot. The women, who dressed so carefully, wilted when they went out even short distances, and looked as faded as they might at the end of the day. The first bell was about to ring in schools and colleges, and the late-comers were surging towards their classes, girl-students looking as if they might start crying any moment. A temporary void filled the street.

Isakki strolled along College Road towards the clock tower as if it were moonlight. He greeted people on the way, stopped to chat with a few, laughing boisterously. He knew this was not the time to hurry after news, though usually he was in a hurry when he wanted to impress people. His being a newspaper correspondent was vital in giving him status. It was very rarely that he sauntered along as he was doing that day. He felt he was not just a journalist but a creative person too, and he needed such occasions to prepare himself to be a creative writer. He would tell his fans and young writers that on such walks he got some rare ideas, saw scenes which gave him inspiration. He would tell his readers that his next book would be his finest. The readers would never get to read it as he was sure that it would be banned on publication, but it would make newspaper headlines, be discussed in the legislative assembly, and cause some headache to officials and ministers. All this was inevitable. The bang that

comes out of guncotton cannot be made by ordinary cotton.

His freshly laundered clothes had been delivered that morning. The last two days he had been going about in crushed and slightly dirty clothes. As if to make up for it, today he had emerged in white khadi (hand-spun) clothes. On days when the laundry arrived, his creativity would look up. On those days he would stroll about, feeling every inch a creative artist. To say that his walking down College Road that day was decided by the arrival of fresh clothes would be tantamount to saying that two plus two makes four.

He was skeletal in build. He had a narrow chin and a wide skull which made him look like a bicycle seat. His eyes which one noticed immediately were sunk in deep pits, and looked like narrow slits made by a chisel. When he laughed they disappeared altogether. And he laughed a lot, sometimes falsely, so one rarely saw his eyes. That day, he was wearing a loose jibba with three buttons on the side in the Malayalam style. He had a kerchief knotted around his neck, the knot sinking deep into the pit that was his Adam's apple. He was carrying a black shoulder-bag and the day's issue of *Travancore Nesan*.

As he passed by the Excelsior Press, he saw its proprietor, Francis, standing on the steps outside, and greeted him most respectfully, palms held together against his forehead. Francis beckoned him. Isakki fawned, said, 'I always feel good when I see you, sir. You must do me a small favour.'

Francis said, 'We will see about that. That advertisement yesterday about my press in your paper—you think you can play games with me?' And he grabbed Isakki's right hand and twisted it against his back.

Not wanting to have his shoulder dislocated, Isakki quickly turned around and presented his back to Francis, and squealed, 'Sir please let go, I can't bear the pain.' Francis loosened his hold a bit. Looking over his shoulder, Isakki pleaded, 'Please let go, sir, and I will tell you everything.' Francis released him. Isakki then said, 'I put in the advertisement, sir. I heard yesterday that someone else is planning to start a press here, so I thought it would be good to give you some publicity.'

'Who is this someone?'

'Michael, who left your service.'

'Hmm, when did you develop this great concern for me as if you were the mother who gave birth to me? If you worry about everybody like this, you will lose weight.'

'You have a special place in my heart, sir, I swear on you,' so saying Isakki laid his right hand on Francis' head.

Francis said, 'Look here. Go see that fellow, Michael. Tell him that his former employer was quite rattled when he heard that Michael was also going to open a press—and get an advertisement from him too.'

'No, no, that would be a dirty trick.'

'Well, that is exactly what I am saying.'

Isakki displayed his right arm and said piously, 'It is not in my blood to do a thing like that.'

Francis countered with, 'Hey, what is that on your arm? Eczema? Have an oil-bath with soapnut powder.'

Isakki said, 'Stop teasing me, sir, I do need a favour. Please give me the eighth of a pound of the letter "ka".'

'"Ka", eighth of a pound, eh? What for, fellow?'

'I am going after somebody.'

'Who?'

'The education minister. I don't like his policies. He is going to ruin our children.'

'So?'

'I have to repeat the word *education* several times, and I don't have enough "ka".'

Francis asked him if he had enough dots to put over the second letter to make it into an "l". 'If you don't have enough dots, go ahead and print it as "kalavi", what difference does it make?'

This was an elaborate pun. In Tamil, education is kalvi. To get the 'la' sound, one has to use the letter 'l' and put a dot over it. Otherwise the word becomes kalavi which in turn means sexual intercourse. Unmindful of the surroundings, Isakki expressed his appreciation of the joke by laughing uproariously, with suitable gestures. Relief that the conversation had now gone beyond the advertisement was mixed in it. A servant boy came along, carrying a cup of coffee in one hand and some refreshments in the other, and Isakki said, licking his lips, 'Sir, don't I get some?'

Francis said, putting an arm around Isakki, 'Come on in,' but Isakki said he was actually feeling full, disengaged himself, and moved on.

He arrived at the clock tower junction, and greeted every trader as he passed by. He studied the newspaper posters hanging from the news-stand at the corner. He muttered to himself, 'Dirty rascals, making money by enticing the kids with obscene pictures. I'll teach you a lesson some day.' He picked up an English newspaper, and scanned the front page casually, as if to find out if they had enough wit to reproduce adequately what he had reported. Two children came to buy a children's magazine named *Mouse*, and stopped to stare at him. Isakki knit his

brows to indicate disinterest, and looked at the front page up and down once again. His brows knitted further. He carelessly folded the paper into four, but the news agent took it from him, folded it properly to be able to sell it to a customer, smiling the while at Isakki.

'These fellows don't have any ideas for their lead articles, brother, and look at their English,' Isakki said, smiling affectionately at the children, who came out of their study of him, smiled shyly, paid for their magazine and went away.

Isakki crossed the clock tower and went through the bazaar towards Tamarind Tree Junction. He thought he would go to Damu's shop. He would learn about the latest developments, find out what reptile had crawled out of which hole. At the Junction he looked at Damu's shop which was half-concealed by the tree, and saw that it was crowded. A great number of bicycles were parked outside. He guessed that it was the day for cigarette distribution. Chellappan was standing near the iron safe, clad in a gold-coloured khadi jibba, smoking a cheroot. Isakki said to himself, 'Well, well.' He was disappointed at not seeing Damu there. As he was aimlessly looking around, Khader's shop caught his eye. There wasn't a soul around. In a corner an employee was writing the accounts. The shop presented a dark and gloomy appearance. What Isakki's thoughts were, one could not say, as he leisurely strolled up to the shop, and greeted the accountant, 'Are you keeping well, brother?'

'I am all right. What is well and ill to someone like me?'

Isakki laughed and asked, 'Is the proprietor in?' The accountant gestured towards the ladder leading upstairs.

'He is up there?'

'Hmm.'

'Sleeping?'

'How can he sleep, in the middle of the day? The bile will rise.'

'He is keeping away from people, isn't he, brother?'

'What else do you expect, when everything has become public knowledge? Got any snuff?'

Isakki took out a packet and handed it to the accountant. He said, 'Don't worry, brother, we will cheer him up.'

'Cheer whom up?'

'The proprietor, of course.'

'Oh I thought you meant me.'

'Come, cheering you up is no trick.'

'Listen, Isakki, have you observed an old widow who comes from Navakkadu in a big car?'

'Yes.'

'I believe she is worth ten lakhs and has no family. Why don't you arrange for her to adopt me?'

Isakki brayed his usual laughter and said, 'Let us see, I'll talk to her.'

The accountant said, 'Isakki, do you know that ladies' finger sells at one per anna in the market, and not bigger than my little finger at that. That is what the Nadar with the tuft, who sits in the southern corner, sells it for. Isakki, you must expose him in your paper some day. I feel like killing him when I think about him. One anna for a ladies' finger no bigger than my little finger; may a plague take him.'

'No problem, brother, I can certainly write about him, I have taken on much bigger people. May I see the proprietor?'

'What is up, fellow, that you should want to see him after all this time?'

'No particular reason, I just thought I would see him.'

'No reason? You don't know the word and your crowd doesn't know it. I have known you all since your grandfather's days.'

Isakki laughed and started climbing the ladder, and the accountant watched him until he disappeared, sniffed the pinch of snuff he had been holding between his fingers, said to himself, 'Well, well, the tortoise has burrowed in, and the master well caught,' and bent down to his accounts again.

Isakki greeted Khader most respectfully, and stood for a half minute with eyes closed, as if in the presence of a divinity. Khader, who was lying in an easy chair, lost in his own thoughts, was considerably surprised by Isakki's unexpected visit. He greeted Isakki politely and drew up a chair for him. Isakki sat down in the chair. There was a brief silence while each wondered how to begin the conversation.

Isakki was the first to speak. He studied Khader's face for a few seconds, and said, 'What is the matter? You have lost so much weight?' As Khader said, 'I've not been well for the last few days, I get a fever every evening,' Isakki interrupted him to say, 'You shouldn't lose heart like this, it is foolish.'

'No, no, it is nothing like that, and nothing has happened to me. Everything is in order and the work goes on.'

'I see you have sold your car.'

'Yes, it was an old car, and I was sinking too much money in getting it repaired. I have booked a new car, should get it in two or three months.'

Isakki said, 'Brother, may I say something? And don't think a small fellow like me is trying to advise. There is a time for everything. Up there, He is casting the dice. No one can say when one will win, when one will lose.'

'That is true.'

'I have seen them myself, the brothers, carrying the goods they bought in the market on their own heads as they could not afford a coolie . . .'

'Whom are you talking about?'

'How is it you keep asking whom I am talking about? I am of course talking about our future municipal chairman.'

'Who is that?'

'Obviously you don't know the news. Don't you read the *Nesan*?' and Isakki showed Khader the paper he was carrying around.

Khader looked at the paper and Damu's picture immediately caught his eye. He studied the news. He said, 'Oh, is he standing for election? I think I heard someone saying so a couple of days ago.'

'The news has been going around for the last ten days. I didn't believe it until yesterday when he came to the office, said he had filed his nomination, and that he was banking on our support.'

'Let him stand, let him win, let him become chairman,' said Khader, and Isakki responded, 'Oh yes, let him, I am not standing in his way.'

Khader said dryly, 'You also give him good support. Already your paper has been for Damu. Who is to stop you now?'

Isakki bristled. 'What? We are supporting him?'

'Yes, your paper. It is known to everybody. You are constantly running his picture, reporting his speeches, your headlines carry his challenges, his thunderous speeches. Let it go on. What is he giving you for advertisement per month, a thousand rupees?' Isakki was silent. Khader said, 'Why so silent?'

'I'll take your leave, brother,' and Isakki stood up to go, arms raised in respectful salutation.

Khader was taken aback, and said, 'Why are you leaving so suddenly?'

'Well, I don't think you are in a good mood now. I can talk back to you, but it won't be nice if somebody heard us. You have misunderstood me so completely that I don't feel like saying anything.'

'Was there anything wrong in what I said?'

'I am not saying so. You said what you believed. But may I point out something?' Khader said yes, and asked to be corrected if he had said anything wrong.

Isakki sat down again. 'You spoke in anger. Not even the Nizam of Hyderabad can buy my pen, for any price. A daily newspaper is bound to be fickle, I don't deny it. But for you to say . . .' he stopped short, words failing him, though he wanted to make a ringing declaration.

Khader said, 'Look, I didn't mean it that way.'

'Whatever you meant, it is my fate to have to listen to it.'

'Come on now, I said it for a joke and you are taking it so seriously, very bad of you.'

'I shouldn't blame you. This is all the result of what my previous proprietor did, and I am reaping the reward. The man left the press and the paper to an evil sweeper-woman.'

'To a sweeper?'

'Yes, don't you know the story? He and his wife had a bitter fight. Finally she said, old man, go destroy yourself any way you want. I am going to my children.' She packed up and went away to Sri Lanka where her son and daughter are in a good position. The old man decided to take care of himself, cooked his own food, and scratched away at editorials. One day he developed an abscess in his back. He called her and asked her to apply medicine on his back.'

'Called whom?'

'Please keep listening. She was sweeping, and she immediately put away her broom, dressed his abscess.'

Khader laughed. Isakki became enthused.

'Shouldn't she have removed her hand when the abscess was cured? She didn't. I asked printer Samuel one day, "Brother Samuel, why is she not removing her hand?" and he said, "Brother Isakki, that hand was not placed there to be taken away again."'

'How old was your proprietor then?'

'A year or two short of eighty. She was about fifty or fifty-five.'

'Then what?'

'What then? He was completely under her control. If you asked him what headline to run, he would say, let her come, I'll ask her.'

Khader laughed again.

'The stars were good to her. The old man died in two years, leaving the press and the paper and all his property to her.'

'That is a good story,' said Khader.

'A good story? You can make it into a film. You can have no idea what we are going through in her hands. She has three horse carriages for rental. I want to teach her that we are different from her carriage-drivers. I have been trying to for three years but nothing has any effect on her. The first thing she says to me in the morning is, "Did you get any advertisements yesterday? Don't loiter around, and don't waste the pages of the paper by publishing news about all sorts of people. Go get some advertisements." Brother Khader, you don't know how I am suffering at her hands . . . but when I come out of the office after being rebuked by her, I run into people who praise me for what I wrote about Russia, or Churchill or the budget, I can't help feeling

pleasure. Low level pleasure, maybe, but that is what keeps me going. But it is a dog's life, if I go on talking like this I might end up weeping.'

Khader kept looking at Isakki's face intently. One moment Isakki looked like an innocent child, the next like a well-trained comic actor. Khader felt pity and amusement at the same time. Mostly he felt sympathy for Isakki, and said, 'When you look deep into any business, there is always some sadness underneath. What can one do about it? We suffer. Why we suffer we do not know. Something presses on our heart, preventing us from being happy. We are unable to escape it. The more we want to relax, the deeper do we get into the mud.'

'Say what you like, brother, I have seen a bit of life and I hear people say, the Kural says so, the Gita says so, the Bible has all the answers, you can't beat the Koran for solace, and so forth, but none of it seems to be of any use to people like us. The moment you are born, it is just trouble, trouble all the way. Every day some suffering, that is all.'

The conversation languished. Khader in his easy chair looked out, Isakki kept staring steadily at the floor beneath him. After a while, Khader said, 'Are you upset with me?'

Isakki looked at Khader and laughed. 'No, no, nothing like that. I was thinking of something else.'

'I didn't mean to hurt your feelings.'

'Come on, don't keep thinking about it, I've already forgotten about it, and in any case you have the right to pull me up. You have the right to twist my ear and say, young man, you are not following the right path, be wise and change your ways. But let me now tell you what I came here for, whatever you might think about it . . .' and Isakki took out his pad of snuff from his pocket, took a pinch and sniffed

it, looking away from Khader. He stared at the wall until his face resumed its composure, wheeled around, and said, 'Brother, you have a good opportunity now.' Khader looked at Isakki without saying anything. 'Shall I tell you?'

'Go ahead.'

Isakki began. 'It is after much thinking that I say this is a good opportunity for you. Out of the two thousand some votes you are already assured of over seven hundred. We can easily split the votes of his community, and you can easily win. I will talk to brother Joseph and organize the whole thing. He is enormously rich, and it is no big thing for him to support you. If he decides not to bank one year's income from his estates, but use it for the election, he can consign not one Damu but ten Damus to the ocean at Cape Comorin. The fellow does not know what is what and he is trying to take on brother Joseph.'

'But what is Chairman Joseph's interest in this business? Why should he be dragged in?'

'Brother, haven't you grasped the situation? Damu's idea is not just to win the election and become a councillor, but to become the chairman himself. That means he is interested only in opposing brother Joseph. Brother Joseph wants to put up a strong candidate against Damu, and make every effort to help him win. He wants to nip Damu's ambitions in the bud.'

Khader said, 'Is that so?'

'Yes, that is why I am telling you all this confidentially. Also, no one can survive in this town unless this fellow is put down.'

'He is arrogant because he has money now.'

'All because of the business. He thinks he is doing a grand job, but if I set my mind to it, I can

reduce his income by half in a day. Let us see what he does then, whether he comes to his senses. If not, I still have an idea, a secret weapon. It is no use telling you about it now, you won't be able to use it anyway. I don't mean you alone. Everybody is afraid of him, he is a ruffian, and no denying that. All the same, all of you were scared by him, and contributed to making a big man of him.'

'What? I, scared? Why should I be afraid of this dog? I have known three generations of his family. His grandmother used to make the beds in the Maharaja's palace. The family survived by pimping for their good-looking women. If you ask one of them his father's name he would give one name this week and another the next week. Why should I be afraid of a dog like that?'

'Don't dig up the sewer, brother, don't. It is a big sewer.'

'Then why did you make a big thing of this?'

'I didn't mean to, but everybody is under that man's control. You have got to stand up when you see him, you must let your veshti down when he comes, you must salute him, and you have to talk about "the leader" or you are not safe from his followers.'

Khader said, 'There are always a few dogs in front of a butchershop. What can we do about it?'

'Well, he is acting high and mighty now, but suppose I fell the tamarind tree, what will he do then, I ask you.'

'Fell the tamarind tree? Well, there will be less dirt to sweep. You wouldn't have to sweep the shop front twice a day.'

'The cash-box will become empty, brother, I repeat, the cash-box will become empty.'

'You are talking obvious nonsense.'

'Not so, brother. I am saying this after much thought. His business does not depend on the goods he sells. The same goods are available in a hundred shops on either side. His business depends entirely on the shade of the tree.'

Khader looked at Isakki's face intently, without saying a word. His silence increased Isakki's enthusiasm. 'It is a small job brother, but one must have the brains to grasp the idea.'

'What you say is correct, up to a point, but I don't think much damage will be done.'

'There will definitely be much damage, there is no doubt about it. His shop is not like yours. People can't enter it. They have to stand outside and buy the goods they want. It is the shade of the tamarind tree that invites them to stop there, makes them buy some plantains, chew a paan, smoke a cigarette. If there were no shade, the business would be affected. Not ordinarily affected, its backbone will be broken.'

'Let us say you are right, but what can you do about it. One needs an axe to cut down a tree. You have only an old pen, and if you try to cut the tree with it, your nib will be blunted.'

Isakki laughed and replied, 'That is true. One needs an axe. The axeman must have written permission, signed by the municipal chairman. That is all correct. But if this old pen of mine scratches out four white sheets, one day, as you come to open the shop, you will see the tamarind tree going in a lorry in the opposite direction.'

'That is a big challenge you are taking,' said Khader.

'It is not just vain talk. The seed has already been sown where it should be, it has to be watered occasionally, goats that come near should be kept

away. Before all that, I have a small job to do, but I can't find the man.'

Khader asked who, and Isakki looked at Khader. An inscrutable expression played on his face. He looked at the ladder, then again at Khader's face, and pulled his chair close to Khader, and said, 'No one else but Damu. I have a confidential subject to discuss with him.'

Khader said, 'Oho?'

'Brother Joseph sent for me suddenly. About two o'clock at night, his brother-in-law came in the jeep, and said I was to go with him immediately. I couldn't say no. We are like twins, and he has done me many favours. I have also done what I could for him. That is not all. He has affection for me, and he also likes to consult me on several things, and feels relief doing so.

'When I got to his place, I found him wide awake, sitting in lamplight on the platform outside the house. He told me what the matter was. I said only one thing to him. I said I am so shamed that you are worrying over such a small matter. He said, it is not that really, but he is such a quarrelsome man, he has made some money, and they say he enjoys some respect from the people. I got very angry, and I said, why don't you declare yourself insolvent, and go out in a loincloth. He had nothing to say. I further said, you are sitting on an elephant, why should you be afraid of a dog barking? All right, boy, he said, I won't be afraid any longer. You have said there is nothing to be afraid of, so I won't be afraid. As you will see, I'll be brave. I came back, and I thought why earn somebody's hatred, and I decided to come here and tell him what I had to.'

'You haven't seen him? He should be here any minute.'

'I have to see him and tell him, just one word. Look here, the assembly elections are coming in six months. We will let you contest, and hand over to you your seat. If you say brother Joseph is supporting you, your ballot box will be full, and even if you turn it upside down, not a vote will fall out. Now be sensible, and withdraw your nomination. This I will have to tell him firmly.'

Khader asked, 'But if he says no?'

'Well, I have my pen. Someone asked Napoleon once, is the sword mighty, or the pen. . .

But Khader interrupted him, saying, 'What is the point in retailing old stories? Let us see to what has to be done now.'

'Four of my leading articles will destroy him.'

'That we will know only later on, whether he is destroyed or whether brother Joseph is destroyed.'

'Brother Joseph will be destroyed only if I die of a heart-attack tonight.'

'Don't get angry. I ask out of ignorance, what can you do to him?'

'Nothing physical, really. I can't cut his throat or break his leg, but I can make him bite the dust. I can't do anything else.'

'You will make him bite the dust? I suppose by pushing him suddenly from the behind!'

'All right, let us not argue, let us wait for the counting of the votes.'

'You think he might withdraw?'

'Can't say, depends on if he is wise, or foolish.'

'I'll tell you one thing. I have known him for fifteen years, and I have never known him not to accomplish what he set out to do.'

'Let him try.'

'All right, why this great concern for brother Joseph.'

'I have already told you. We are like brothers. As a human being, he is good as gold. Another thing. Who do you think brother Joseph is? He is the younger brother of my former proprietor.'

'Own brother?'

'No, same father but different mothers. Brother Joseph is the son of the second wife.'

'Is that so?'

'That's what the lady says.'

'Which lady?'

'The lady who owns our press and paper. She tells me this morning, boy, I want my brother-in-law to win the election. Make all the right points. Stop writing anything cranky immediately. No dishonour should come to our family.'

'Is there such a thing?'

'She talks as if the old man and she have been together for years and years. What do you think?'

'So you are in the thick of it now?'

'Yes, yes, yes, don't doubt it for a moment. Now, will you please think about what I said?'

'What?'

'File your nomination with confidence. You can win easily. I shall bring brother Joseph to your house, and we can discuss further details then.'

'This is something to be considered seriously, isn't it?'

'Yes, of course, to be considered not just once but twice, thrice. Think about it carefully. There is a week's time yet. I'll take your leave now; talking with you, one doesn't know how time passes.'

Isakki left, and Khader leaned back in his easy chair, and closed his eyes.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The news that Abdul Khader had decided to run for election was splashed in the *Travancore Nesan*. It was considered a fine example of journalistic ethics when the newspaper published a picture of Khader of the same dimensions as that of Damu which had appeared earlier. When the leading article the next days attacked Damu fiercely, and demanded that every self-respecting citizen in Ward 13 should vote for Abdul Khader, nobody was particularly surprised. They told one another that the *Nesan* was doing its duty in its own fashion, and smacking their lips waited with keen anticipation for further editorials in the *Nesan*. They knew that when Isakki dug for dirt, he would dig deep and wide, and they had total faith in him.

The election fever rose higher and higher as anticipated, with the contestants attacking and counter-attacking one another in speeches of violence and acrimony. The speakers lost their voices from all the shouting they did, but they kept talking with their hoarse throats, so much so that their voices ultimately came back to them. Notices in all the colours of the spectrum, with no indication of the presses where they were printed, flew about and were happily collected by the children, who stuffed them into their pockets and proudly displayed their collections to one another. By now the speakers had reached the table-thumping stage in their excitement. The women-folk, who were usually cooped inside their houses during the day, sat on their doorsteps in

the evenings, admiring the wonder called a public meeting, and the magicmen who could orate endlessly, without stopping once. They particularly enjoyed the table-thumping. The streets of Ward 13 hummed with activity. And there was always news to discuss, news to pass on. Normally lazy persons shed their indifference and suddenly became active. Damu was secretly perturbed. Ward 13 had a majority of Muslim votes, followed at some distance by Hindu Vellala votes. The Vellala votes were divided into groups, descendants of sons, and others. There was a further division among the two groups, the descendants being divided into five groups, and the others into three. Damu calculated, somewhat uncertainly, that he would have to create the right atmosphere so that he could get the votes of at least one section of one group and two sections from the other, which would help see him through. There was considerable confusion in the minds of the Vellala groups. There were those who felt that rather than vote for someone who was being supported by the opposite camp, they might as well vote for the Muslim candidate, while others thought that, whatever might be the differences among themselves, they could not possibly vote for a Muslim. Some decided not to vote at all, and when a young man pointed out that not voting would be an affront to democracy, he was angrily asked to mind his own business, so reported 'Town Sparrow' in the *Travancore Nesan*.

Damu had stood for election, banking on the solid support of the Muslim votes, and his Muslim friends had committed themselves to supporting him, but the entry of Khader into the fray introduced an unexpected element. Damu feared that Khader would cut sharply into the Muslim votes he was expecting,

but his Muslim friends reassured him. They admitted that Khader's contesting had made it embarrassing for them to canvass for him openly, but they would work for him vigorously behind the scene. They also warned him to take into account the possibility of the women's votes being split, because of communal feelings. At almost the very last minute, Chellappan, Damu's brother, and his friends came up with a brilliant stratagem.

There was a Muslim school in Ward 13. An old Muslim used to sit in front of it, selling groundnuts, puffed rice and sweets. He had been doing so for over twenty-five years, one was told, and he had been a tailor before his eyes failed him.

One morning people who happened to see him were astounded. He was wearing a brand-new full-sleeved shirt made of fine material. He was further decked out in a mill-made, double-fold veshti, new boots, and a new, red, attractive fez cap. A car came and stopped in front of his hut. He, and his seven grandchildren who wanted a ride got into the car, and it moved on.

The deadline for nominations was twelve noon that day. Only after the old man impressed his thumb-mark on the nomination papers, did the clock strike twelve. He was then garlanded and taken out on procession. The children from the Muslim school ran after the car, shouting with great excitement and enthusiasm, 'Groundnut Granpa,' over and over again. He packed into the car as many of the children as could be accommodated. It was an old model convertible, and the roof had been rolled down. Some of the children held on to the doors and stood on the steps. The old man was surrounded by children some of whom sat on the rolled-up top, and he was supremely happy.

His face glowed. He beamed at everybody, laughed with his toothless mouth, which behind his beard looked like a rat-hole in a bush. He made salaams to everybody on the road. The children were very excited. He was Groundnut Granpa not only to the children of the Muslim school, but to all the children on the road. He was happy he could take them all in the car.

He gestured to the driver to stop when they neared his hut. His granddaughters had gathered at the door and were looking at him uncomprehendingly. Women were peering at him through the holes in the sack curtains that hung at their doorsteps, and through screened windows. Here and there a known face peered. The old man's eldest granddaughter held up her small child, and showed Grandfather to it. The old man indicated to her that he wanted the child, and a boy brought it to the car, and the old man held it in his lap. The car started, and the children shouted their decision to vote only for Groundnut Granpa.

The procession stopped in front of Khader's house, but the doors and window were all closed. Khader's children had however sneaked out by the backdoor and were standing in front of the house. The old man asked the children, 'Hey Khaja, Mohammed, Ali, who are you voting for?'

All three children shouted in unison, 'For Groundnut Granpa.'

'What about your father?'

'We won't vote for him.'

'Get into the car,' said the old man, and the three children did so. The car started again.

In the Vellala street, the outer wall of the Siva temple in the corner had crumbled down. With the permission of the Temple Board, Damu had it

repaired by labourers who worked day and night. He also provided improvident Muslim children with clothes. One of his election promises was to have a street tap installed on Vellala street. He said he could not bear the sight of Hindu women carrying vessels, and going to far-away wells for water in the sweltering heat.

Janab Abdul Azeez, Khader's father-in-law, arrived on the scene from Kalakkad. His relationship with Khader at this point was rather shaky. He thought that Khader lost the cigarette agency through his own folly. He had also expected Khader to come to him for advice and suggestions when faced with myriad problems. If Khader had come to him, he would have resolved all Khader's problems, using his superior knowledge and intelligence, and Khader would have developed an admiration for him. He had various plans and solutions ready, but Khader did not give him the opportunity to put them into effect. Janab Azeez then got the feeling that Khader was deliberately ignoring him, in fact treating him with contempt and indifference. He started criticizing and abusing Khader to his young wife in season and out of season. He began telling her about the past, and how he had made a man of Khader who was now displaying rank ingratitude. His wife was astonished at his abusing day in and day out someone who was not even physically present.

Janab Azeez learned about Khader's running for election only through the newspapers. 'Someone has put him up to it,' he thought. 'Well, all he has left now is a house, and if he loses that also that will be it.' He said to his friends, in a rage, caustically, 'Nothing else is the matter. He wants to roll bidis again, that is all.' Just the same, he would go early in the morning to the bazaar to meet the bus bringing the

newspapers. He also probed the passengers for the latest information.

When he heard that Groundnut Granpa had also joined the contest, he had a sinking feeling. He muttered to himself, 'This beggar is going to muddy the waters.' His secret hope and expectation that Khader should win now received a big blow. Having criticized Khader all these days, and having called him all sorts of names, he did not know how to tell his wife what he had in mind now. Giving her some lame excuse, he took the bus to town.

When the bus entered the town, he studied the posters keenly to see whether Khader or Damu had the most, soliciting votes, and he counted them all along the way. When he got off the bus, booked a hotel room, left his bag there, and went straight to the hut of Groundnut Granpa. But he did not expect the firmness the old man displayed.

The old man said, 'Look here, Azeez, I won't withdraw even if you give me a hundred thousand pieces of gold.'

'So you are going to let the other man win.'

'Your son-in-law is also "the other man", as far as I am concerned. Ten years ago, your son-in-law sent me a lawyer's notice for nine and three-quarters rupees I owed him for a pair of lungis. Did he think of me as one of us then? Azeez, don't waste your words on me. Money is the only power in the world. The moneyed people will always be together, doesn't matter which god they worship. If you so badly want the other man defeated, why don't you ask your son-in-law to withdraw?'

Azeez said, 'I won't rest until I see you defeated,' and the old man countered, 'Even your father cannot do that. Go away and mind your own business.'

'I don't even mind Damu winning, I just want you to lose,' said Janab Azeez.

The old man replied, 'Come to the municipality on the first of next month. You will see me sitting under a ceiling fan. Go, pull out your tongue, and die of shame.'

The altercation became fierce. The old man started yelling hysterically. His eyes reddened and the nerves stood out taut in his throat. The women started wailing from inside the hut. A big crowd of children gathered, and made so much noise that Janab Azeez could not be heard over their yowling. One of them knocked off his cap from behind him. When he bent down to pick it up, another snatched at his upper cloth. He walked away quickly from the hut, with the children hooting and calling him names all the way to the end of the street.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The resolution to cut down the tamarind tree was passed in the municipal council, against fierce opposition, by three votes. The *Travancore Nesan* gave a six-column headline to the news, and praised Municipal Chairman, M. C. Joseph, to the skies in an editorial.

I still remember the excitement all round when the news reached the public, people gathered in the Vadaseri market grounds, around the clock-tower, in the Tamarind Tree Junction bazaar, and near Kottar to discuss the new development. The general feeling was that Damu had lost out, and many felt that this would cost him the election also, however indirectly. People realized that this was a shot in the arm for Khader and his group, and awaited keenly his further campaigning, and what shape it might take. Listening to them, one got the impression that they were imagining Khader winning the battle with brute strength, and the valiant forces of Damu were being scattered in every direction. The *Travancore Nesan* captured the minds of its readers who said admiringly, over and over again, what Isakki had in his hand was a real pen. I think in a way he fully deserved these tributes, no one could any longer doubt that he could sway the minds of his readers with his pen. The credit for making the tamarind tree an issue, and forcing an emergency resolution on the council proposing that it be cut down as that was the people's wish, went to Isakki alone.

The reasons he presented for cutting down the tree were many. He explored the previous history of the tree like an experienced scholar. God knows where he got all the past history from. It was as if the tree itself had told him its story from birth to the present. Or he must have talked to Damodara Asan, now long dead and gone!

He claimed that it was an inauspicious tree, a tree of bad omen that only brought ill luck to people. He retold eloquently the tragic story of Chellathayi hanging herself from the tree, adding all sorts of frills to it. He pointed out its dry barks and rotten leaves falling into the tank gave the water a bad smell. Giving a new twist to an old story, he pointed out that the stench from the tank was so bad that it had once ruined the procession of Maharaja Puram Thirunal.

Isakki further revealed something no one had known before. He said that when the tamarind tank was drained and filled with mud and a road laid across it, the British engineer handling the project had recommended that the tree be cut down, but that some people, in their self-interest conspired and succeeded in killing the proposal. He asked rhetorically if there was any compensation to be had in the world if an old branch were to fall on the head of a girl going home from school. He asked the people with humanity in their hearts to visualize the disaster it would be if the tree were to fall down when the Tamarind Tree Junction was crowded with shoppers and persons going to the cinema.

The *Travancore Nesan* published many letters on the subject. Most of them supported Isakki's point of view. One of them recalled an old incident about just such a tree falling down and killing many people somewhere in the north. Isakki also met prominent

people, sought their views, and published them in the paper. Everybody was impressed by the fact that the academic community supported Isakki to the last man.

The chief electrical engineer also lent his support to the felling of the tree. He said the branches of the tree were constantly getting among the overhead lines and causing blackouts when least expected. He further explained that to have a green tree in a spot where dozens of electric wires crossed was a source of potential danger, and that he had officially brought this situation to the notice of the municipality. His views along with his photograph occupied half a page of the newspaper.

In its report, the inquiry committee, set up by chairman Joseph when the tamarind tree was rifled of its fruits with Umaiyaorubaham Pillai as convener, tacitly agreed that there were no clear clues as to who might have perpetrated the outrage. There was sufficient reason to assume, the report said, that miscreants who were stoning the tree in retaliation for the municipality taxing them for advertisements they put up on the tree had also shattered Khader's shop sign, and that the best solution would be to have the tamarind tree removed.

The report was discussed in the municipal council. Kambaramayanam Ananthan Pillai criticized it vehemently. He said, 'This town is a sacred place, and the tamarind tree is its sacred tree.' He admitted that the tree was mute and crippled, but nonetheless it was a living organism. He warned that those who were today in favour of cutting down the tamarind tree simply because it was a tree might tomorrow come up with proposals for doing away with the lame and halt among them. He derided them as worldly-minded people. He cited the famous scientist

J. C. Bose in support of his view that trees are living things. He quoted extensively verses from Tamil literature to prove that the Tamil people had always cherished trees as gods. The council was enormously impressed by his erudition and his mastery over scientific lore. He concluded his speech by saying, 'If you wish to remove the saffron spot from the forehead of a married woman, go ahead, and may God forgive you.'

After two days of discussion, the resolution favouring the felling of the tamarind tree was duly passed by the municipal council. Khader's heart overflowed with joy when he read the proceedings of the council in that day's *Travancore Nesan*. There was a detailed account of the entire discussion, and the text of the resolution authorizing the cutting down of the tree. Khader read these over more than once, and rejoiced at the thought that he was able to get the better of Damu at least on one issue.

The fact was Khader had no means of countering the various strategies Damu had adopted. Setting up a Muslim candidate against him, funding him adequately, and arranging for the Muslims of the area to work for him were master-strokes of Damu and his supporters, and a death-blow to Khader. When he went on a house to house campaign, seeking votes, Khader could see for himself that the old man had the total sympathy of the women and other old men—there was no doubt about it. The old man had the freedom of all the houses, and could freely enter even the women's quarters. In every house the children were pestering their elders to vote for Groundnut Granpa. Khader had heard that the women said to the old man, 'How long can you sit out all day in the heat? If this election can get you relief from that, our votes and the votes of our folks

are yours.' He also found out that the women were secretly giving the old man money, paddy, rice and similar materials. The old man made the most of it all. He went from house to house, saying, 'If you want to see me always in the kind of clothes I am now wearing, if you want me to have at least half a meal every day, then please vote for me. Let me stay in the shade at least in my old age. Khader is young, if he doesn't win this election, something else will come his way.' Many old women asked Khader to his face, 'Why do you want to ruin that old man's livelihood? He has no strength, do you also have no strength?'

His daily experiences intensified Khader's hatred of Damu. He even considered withdrawing from the contest, giving his full support to Groundnut Granpa, and defeating Damu in the process, but his father-in-law's hostility to the old man made it impossible to discuss the idea with him. Also people would think that he withdrew out of fear of the old man. Further, he had accepted a lot of money from chairman M. C. Joseph, which he had spent on his campaign. The money was given to him to defeat Damu. Now, to withdraw after he had spent all that money, did not seem the right thing to do.

A further blow to Khader at this juncture was the case filed against Damu being thrown out by the court, as there was no solid evidence that Damu had set up men to smash Khader's shop-sign. There was no evidence to support the police case that the scavengers had stoned the tamarind tree either. The scavengers believed that their lawyer, Janardhanam, had won the case for them through his superior intelligence. When there was no evidence that the scavengers had rifled the tree, the charge that Damu had his own men shatter Khader's glass-front, hoping

that the blame would fall on the scavengers, also failed.

Khader became more and more disappointed and depressed as the aces he held slipped through his fingers. It was now that the *Travancore Nesan* started its campaign for cutting down the tamarind tree. Khader remembered all the things that Isakki had told him in person. He did not particularly believe in the secret weapon Isakki said he had but Isakki had enough of a reputation for political skill and savvy that he could not altogether be ignored. Though he did not expect it to happen, it would be a welcome development should Damu be humiliated. He did not want to be accused of being non-cooperative. At the end of the election, if he were to lose his social and financial status, he wanted the same thing to happen to Damu. To this end he prayed.

Now, Khader became an active proponent for cutting down the tamarind tree, in fact a staunch pillar of the movement. A pamphlet on the subject was issued in his name, and he began talking about the tree at his campaign meetings. Damu, who had been ignoring the tamarind tree affair, and had been concentrating night and day on his campaign, was now puzzled by the interest Khader was showing in the subject. He first thought that Khader was merely trying to ingratiate himself with Isakki and chairman M. C. Joseph, but something happened that made him change his mind soon enough.

Khader's business was by now practically dead. He lost good money when he lost the cigarette agency, but he could not cut down on his own expenses or that of the family. He did not want people to know that his circumstances were gradually reducing, and he spent more ostentatiously

than before. Fearing that people would infer something if he were seen walking, he always took taxis even when not necessary. But his capital had dwindled, and he did not have enough funds to replenish his stocks. The shelves in the shop began to look bare. He tried rearranging the existing stocks in different formations but the emptiness showed, and when he could think of nothing else to do, he lost interest in the business. When the electioneering started, his sole interest had been in bringing Damu down. Now with the business failing he could not any longer keep his employees. He terminated the services of two or three after paying them their dues. He was embarrassed about letting go the boys who were especially loyal to him, and they too stayed on for a couple of months without salary. But when finally they began to hurt for money, and nothing was forthcoming from Khader, they left quietly without saying farewell to him, as they were too abashed to do so. The only employee who stayed on was the accountant. Khader had asked him to work out the arrears in the shop accounts, and he kept himself occupied with it. As he had expected he did not get any wages from Khader, only an occasional rupee or two when he pleaded an emergency. At this point, Damu asked the accountant secretly to come to his shop. He thought that as the accountant had long experience of handling cigarette transactions, he would be useful in his shop. The accountant joined Damu's staff.

It was the accountant who clearly explained to Damu why Isakki and Chairman Joseph were in the vanguard of the movement to do away with the tamarind tree, and what Khader's special interest in it was.

To get some cash for electioneering purposes, Damu went to his shop one day, where he found his

brother, Chellappan and his friends engaged in lively discussion. Their talk centered around the municipal resolution.

'All right, brother, why is this beggar Khader so interested in this? Why is he dead set that the tree should be cut down?' asked Damu of his brother. Chellappan said simply that Khader was mad.

Someone sitting behind Chellappan said, 'M. C. Joseph is funding him. So he has to do something to please the chairman.' Now, the accountant who had been busy at his desk peered at them above his spectacles, took a good look all around, and said, 'Shall I tell you briefly why Khader is getting earnest money from M. C. Joseph?' His expression seemed to warn them that it was not a subject to be taken lightly. Damu looked at the accountant keenly, who now put on another expression that indicated he could not bear such scrutiny from Damu, and in any event it was none of his business, and bent down to his accounts books again.

Damu said, tell us what you think.

The accountant again looked at Damu's face, and surveyed the backs of the people who were sitting in front of him. Damu urged him. 'They are all friends of ours. Go ahead.'

The accountant said in a soft voice 'They are planning to dig a grave for us.'

'What do we care if the tree goes? Won't the rice boil in the pot any more?' asked Chellappan.

'They are banking on the fact that the shade will go when the tree is gone.'

'So what?'

'They believe that our business thrives because we are in the shade.' Chellappan laughed loudly. The accountant said, 'I am not saying they are right or wrong. It is simply their calculation.'

Damu sat silently, with no expression on his face. After a minute's thought, he went to the back of the shop, and as he passed through the door, the accountant followed him as if summoned by him by gesture. Half an hour later, Damu walked out of the shop, and went to his election headquarters. The accountant was in a high state of delight. Finally the opportunity arrived for him to be able to prove he felt no loyalty whatsoever towards Khader, and all he wanted now was the grace and favour of his present employers.

At the election meeting that evening, Damu violently condemned the municipal resolution to cut down the tamarind tree. That night at dinner Chellappan said to Damu, 'You act as if you are worried about their strategy. Why do you get so emotional about this? Do you believe our business will go into a decline if the tree is cut down?'

'I am not afraid of that, but they want to wreck the tree just to be able to destroy us. If they want a fight over it, I'll give it to them. Their plan to cut down the tree can't be allowed to happen. What our loss might be if the tree is gone is a totally different matter.'

Damu and prominent citizens from his ward prepared a memorandum, had it signed by hundreds of important people, and submitted it to the municipal chairman. To submit it a procession to the municipality was taken out with Damu heading it. In the front row Kambaramayanam Ananthan Pillai could be seen, with a garland around his neck.

At the municipal office there was a bitter argument between the chairman and Damu. Damu interpreted the chairman's determination to do away with the tree as evidence of their confidence in the conspiracy they had planned.

'I can't explain the Hindus' feelings on this subject, but the tree must not be cut down,' said Damu.

The chairman replied, 'I admit I do not know much about the feelings of the Hindus, but I would like to remind you that the resolution was passed by a council in which the Hindus have majority representation.'

Kambaramayanam raised his voice and asked rhetorically, 'Who is a Hindu? Those who are born as Hindus, or those protect the dharma of the Hindus? Do you know that Hinduism is a lifestyle? It is not like Christianity—' when M. C. Joseph interrupted to say, 'You must excuse me. I am not fit to engage in a discussion about religion. I am an ordinary employee of an ordinary municipality.'

Damu said, 'You know of course that there are coolies in every religion.'

M. C. Joseph replied, 'To refer to municipal councillors as coolies is very much in bad taste.'

'What do those who have no taste know about bad taste? If a blackmarketeer prepares a plan just to destroy one individual trader, and has it supported by a journalist seeking publicity, is there any law that says the municipal council should approve it?'

M. C. Joseph said, 'You may leave now,' and pressed the bell. The attendant opened the door, came in, and looked meaningfully at Damu and Kambaramayanam Ananthan Pillai. 'So you have no intention of considering our feelings, isn't that so?' Damu asked the chairman.

The chairman replied, 'In a democracy, it is the view of the majority that carries, and it will be given the utmost importance. It is a distortion, one among many, that in our country even those who do not believe in democracy run for elections.'

Damu and Ananthan Pillai left the room.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

I still remember the days when the tamarind tree was the only topic of conversation from sunrise to sunset. The interest people displayed in the subject was intense. They talked about it as if it was a family affair. The tamarind tree developed into a factor which would determine the victory or loss of one of two parties, and people were busy with their own speculations on the subject.

As far as the municipality was concerned it became a matter of honour. The council members, all close friends of M. C. Joseph, and seasoned employees of the council like Vallinayagam Pillai were convinced that if the municipality failed to implement the resolution because of the opposition to it, it would lose its authority, and future administrations would have no clout. It was talked about that the contract for felling the tree was given to a contractor from another town, that police help had been sought from Thiruvananthapuram, and the work would start only when there was a response.

While this kind of talk was going around, something unexpected happened one morning. There was a huge crowd in the tamarind tree junction. They said the tamarind tree had become a deity. As soon as we heard the news, my friends and I dashed to the tamarind tree junction. We were jostled by the crowd, we were drenched in sweat, but we were impervious to everything but what was going on around the tree. Pipers and a band played there, as well as a village group of musicians. They were saying that at night

there would be a folk song drama by Agastheeswaram Ananthapadmanabha Pillai. The idol of the goddess was paraded under an umbrella in front of the tree. Heaps of flowers, man-high, decorated the tree. The bark had been sheared from the front of the trunk of the tree, and a silver plaque representing the face of the goddess had been affixed there. The forehead was covered with saffron, and green gems glistened from the eyes. The sun's rays shone brilliantly on it. The fragrance of the burning incense sticks pervaded the area. Everybody wore thin lines of sandal-paste across his forehead. Every pious devotee in town seemed to have congregated there. The bearded leaders of groups that went to the Ayyappa temple were present. Ashram Ganapathi Iyer stood there looking like a rishi from the Vedic times. I have heard Ayyappa devotees say that sometimes, when they were going through the mountains to get to the Ayyappa temple, led by Ganapathi Iyer, rampant wild elephants would, at one look at his face, bow down, raise their trunks in a salute to him, and move on. He stood in front of the tree, eyes closed, in a trance of fervour.

The crowd was spilling over on either side of the cement road. Vehicles that could not get through turned left at the clock tower and went by way of Minakshipuram. People were laughing among themselves that the contractor who had been engaged to cut down the tree had expressed his regrets to the municipality, and had left the town.

That evening there was a big meeting under the tree to discuss the protection and preservation of Hindu religion and its dharma. Several scholars and swamijis spoke. Speaking under the chairmanship of Kambaramayanam Ananthan Pillai, Damu said he was going to organize a platoon of brave young

volunteers for protecting Hinduism and Hindu gods from Muslims and Christians. It would be best for Muslims and Christians not to attempt to hurt the feelings of the Hindus. If they did, thundered Damu, the Hindus knew where the churches and mosques in the town were, and knew also what to do. He pleaded with the other religionists not to provoke the peace-loving Hindu into acts of violence.

People began saying again that Damu was winning. The admiration that was expressed about Damu's intelligence and ingenuity galled Khader. Not his failure but Damu's victory disturbed him most.

When the tamarind tree became a deity, chairman M.C. Joseph withdrew from centre stage. It was rumoured that the Archbishop had sent for him and asked him to be careful. Copies of the *Travancore Nesan* were burned at public meetings. At his request Isakki was afforded police protection. The police also guarded the offices of the *Travancore Nesan* day and night. Isakki stopped writing about the tamarind tree altogether but to cover his own discomfiture kept publishing pro and con letters on the subject. Isakki's friends claimed that during the days of the tamarind tree crisis, the circulation of *Travancore Nesan* had gone up from three thousand to nine thousand.

Khader lived alone nursing his miseries.

I well remember, it was two or three days before the election. It was a Sunday, a market day, and I had gone to the market to buy provisions. A gentle sun was shining as I was on my way back. I stopped at the Ananda Bhavan restaurant, had some coffee. When I came out I could see people running southwards from near the clock tower. The entire street seemed excited. On enquiry, I learned that coolie Ayyappan had been found under the tamarind

tree, stabbed to death. Leaving my shopping bag in the restaurant, I rushed towards the tree. There were crowds of people standing in circles around the tree, with others jostling to get to the front. By the time I got there, the body of coolie Ayyappan had been removed. Some said he had died in the government hospital, that he had given a dying declaration to the police. Others claimed that he was still struggling for life. Clots of blood were splashed around the trunk of the tree. I could not help looking at the plaque of the goddess. The green eyes seemed to be lowered, studying the blood on the ground.

No one could guess for sure who might have stabbed coolie Ayyappan. There were different rumours. Some said there was a woman at the bottom of it all. One of them claimed to have known that coolie Ayyappan had been taking treatment for venereal disease. According to him, the killer did not run away from the spot, but had gone to the police station and surrendered there, and it was on the basis of the information he provided that the police had rushed to the spot, and had removed the dying Ayyappan to the government hospital. Several people immediately hurried to the hospital.

I went home, picking up my shopping bag from Ananda Bhavan restaurant. After breakfast, I went on my bicycle to the police station, the government hospital and the office of the *Travancore Nesan*. Cycling around Ward 13 where Damu and Khader were contesting from, I was able to piece together the information I had collected.

The same night, both Khader and Damu were arrested. The news was confirmed by the *Travancore Nesan* the next morning. A portion of Khader's statement to the police was also carried by the newspaper. Khader had said in his statement that

many days before he was stabbed near the tamarind tree, coolie Ayyappan had sought refuge with him. Thinking that he could avenge himself against Damu by using coolie Ayyappan at an appropriate time, Khader had given him protection. This statement when it appeared in the newspapers astonished everybody.

Coolie Ayyappan had been hiding from the police for many days. Whenever he needed money he would come to Damu at dead of night and Damu gave him whatever amount he asked for. This went on for a while until Damu became tired of the frequency of Ayyappan's demands. Also each time Ayyappan kept increasing his demands. And he was no longer requesting money, or making a plea for it, but demanded it as a matter of right. This irritated Damu no end though he did not show it. It was the time when the case over the shattered sign in Khader's shop was being heard, and understandably Damu did not want to antagonize coolie Ayyappan for fear he might turn against him. He kept decreasing the amount he was giving coolie Ayyappan though. When the case was dismissed for lack of evidence, Damu rejoiced that he was out of the clutches of coolie Ayyappan, he no longer had to pay him any blackmail money.

When Ayyappan came next to Damu for money, Damu advised him to get a job. 'Who will give me a job when I go to jail twice a year?' asked coolie Ayyappan.

'But you must make the effort.'

'It's no use, however hard I might try.'

'You are not giving yourself a chance if you have already made up your mind that you won't get a job.'

'All right, then, why don't you give me one?'

Damu was silent. Ayyappan said, 'See, the same thing will happen to me wherever I might go.' Damu did not respond. 'I was ruined by associating with people like you. You use me and then discard me casually.'

Damu went into the house as he realized that coolie Ayyappan was going to be difficult. He came out with an envelope in his hand. He said, 'Look, Ayyappa, I am giving you more money than usual, a considerable amount. Don't drink it all away. Go to some nice, new town, set up a shop there and try to make a decent living. You can't expect to survive on money you get from other people.' Coolie Ayyappan said nothing, took the money and went away.

It was hardly two months after this, Damu returned home, tired after electioneering. As he was about to sleep, there was a knock on the door, and Ayyappan was standing outside. Damu shouted, 'Get away, you dog.' Coolie Ayyappan stood there, staring at Damu unblinkingly. His eyes reddened and the nerves on his forehead swelled up. He stood like a rock for a long minute, then whirled away from there, with the trace of a smile on his face. For a couple of days he prowled around in the town, listening to the election news and the row over the tamarind tree. He realized that Damu was on the crest of victory, having deified the tamarind tree. His mind went to work. It seemed to him the appropriate moment to get in touch with Khader, very clearly, so that midnight he knocked at Khader's door.

Khader in his statement before the court said that coolie Ayyappan had assured him that he knew a way of making the tree a lifeless stump, and if he were given refuge he would certainly do that. So Khader gave him asylum.

Coolie Ayyappan planned his project very carefully. He knew that as the election day approached, Damu and his friends would be on the alert all night to make sure that their voting bloc remained intact, and would be concentrating their attention on the ward. He chose an appropriate day for his act of destruction, and concluded it, successfully. On that night, around one a.m. he climbed the tree carrying a bottle he had acquired from the village physician which contained a mercury-based poison. He made a hole in the tree on the spot from which branches sprouted, filled it with the poison, and sealed it with cowdung he had brought in a banana leaf. If he had heard any sounds of activity then, he would not have attempted to climb down from the tree. Unfortunately, as he was half-way down, a light was suddenly flashed on his face. He tried to jump down and run away, but three men jumped on him and pinned him down. He tried to defend himself with his knife but one of the men pulled it from his hand and stabbed him with it. The government doctors said that though the wound was small the knife had reached the heart and caused his death.

It turned out that Damu had sent out three volunteers to bring tea and refreshments for party workers who were labouring all night. As the three were returning from the clock tower with the necessary provisions, they had seen coolie Ayyappan climbing down the tree.

Hundreds gathered around the tamarind tree when the news of his killing, and his dying declaration that he had poisoned the tree appeared in the papers. Devotees brought in many village doctors who tried all kinds of emergency aid to

counteract the poison. The place was in fact crammed with devotees.

There was no noticeable change in the tree on the first day, at least as long as daylight lasted. Only when morning came, people could see what had happened during the night. Large numbers of the leaves had fallen down. The lower branches were completely bare. In the next two or three days, the tree was completely shorn of leaves and branches. A well-known physician checked the tree on the fourth day, peeled a bit of the bark and looked, noticed that the sap was not flowing, and declared the tree dead.

There were about five hundred people standing around the tree then. As soon as the physician confirmed that rot had indeed set in the tree, an old devotee ran as if possessed towards Khader's shop, shouting incoherently, and picked up a handful of dust from the street which he flung at the closed shutters of the shop. Immediately others started stoning the shop. The crowd tried to break open the doors and shutters and enter the shop. Some tried to set fire to it. The timely intervention of the police and the fire brigade prevented much damage being done. When the crowd still milled around, unmindful of the police request to disperse, there was a mild cane-charge.

Following this, small skirmishes occurred. It was feared that a serious communal clash might start, the news seemed to point that way. The government imposed a curfew on the town. The same night a group of students tried to raid the office of the *Travancore Nesan*, but Isakki escaped unhurt as he was away in the barber shop. The police vans were on the streets all the time during those weeks screaming away with their sirens. Sepoys with heavy sticks were posted at important junctions. It was two weeks

before calm returned to the town. The tamarind tree was still standing, ravaged, a bare stump which had not yet been removed. Any time, an axe-man could remove it without attracting anyone's attention. It was neither a tree nor a deity, now. It was a corpse. Though dead it still swayed with the heavy wind. It looked pathetic, in fact somewhat disgusting.

The spot will become desolate any time now. It had been a long time since sunlight intruded there, not for fifty years, maybe for more. The tree's job of converting light into shade and heat into coolness was at last over. The tree had survived many a windy July, fierce sunshine, torrential rains, the chill of the winter months. It had never complained that it was too hot or too rainy. The flood of the Nineties is still talked about. It carried away buffaloes, as big as small elephants, and cast them into the river. The Harijan colony in Therekalputhur floated in the water. The tamarind tree was then young and had not grown to its full size. It stayed in the water up to its neck uncomplainingly for three days.

The tree had gone through much.

It had looked skywards during years of heat which shrivelled its trunk and branches, leaving just enough life to be able to stand up. The tree neither cried nor laughed.

The tamarind tree had gone through many highs and lows. It was born on a small island, surrounded by water. In the distance were fields which seemed to be holding up the descending skies. It knew little, then, of the outside world. It did not know that there was a mass of humanity, each individual with his own peculiar psyche. In those days the cowherd-children were its friends. Their coming to the island brought an excitement, a lifting of the heart, to the tree. They would take bets on who

would get first to the tamarind tree, swimming. They had also carved their names on the tree, but the carvings disappeared over the years. Time had treated those children with scrupulous indifference. Some of them were now walking with the aid of sticks. The eyesight of some had dimmed. Others had lost their teeth, they had to pulp betel leaves before trying to chew them.

Much time had indeed passed.

At the council meeting, Kambaramayanam Ananthan Pillai had said that they could remove the spot from the forehead of a married woman if they wanted. What he had in mind when he said this is another matter. But there was no doubt that those who had seen the tamarind tree in its heyday in the crossroads would inevitably be reminded of a widow, when they saw the present bareness there. They would be overcome by a feeling of having lost something priceless which could never be retrieved.

As long as I lived in that town, I could not get rid of a sense of desolation after the tamarind tree had been removed from tamarind tree junction. I am sure many others in the town felt the same way. Though the tamarind tree is gone, the crossroads continues to be called, even today, the Tamarind Tree Junction. It was a familiar name and people could not forget it. The name is the only memorial to the tamarind tree. Though the tree is gone its name will ever survive.

Those who got off at the crossroads, or those who had to pass through that way, if they had belonged to our town, would invariably wonder, at one time or another, why the tree was destroyed. They would eliminate the easy answers to the question, and seek the truth, devoting much thought to the subject. Only god knows if they ever found an

acceptable answer to their question. And it does not particularly matter if they do not find an answer to their question. A real question is the equal of a thousand answers. And in any case, there is no harm in thinking a bit.

Over the months, the gradual disappearance of shops from the tamarind tree junction was the direct result of the disappearance of the tamarind tree.

Abdul Khader's shop was closed. He spent his jail term in the Thiruvananthapuram jail, while his wife and children went back to her father in Kalakkad.

Damu was released, but he came out a disappointed man. The unfortunate events that occurred one after the other, his losing the election, or some other reason deep in his consciousness, made him decide to leave town. Selling the shop, his brother Chellappan and he, with their wife and children, packed up and went back to his native Kulithurai. Once when I came to town on a visit, I heard that he was running a small dairy farm on his reduced capital.

The wind changed in the ward when both Damu and Khader were arrested. Groundnut Granpa made the most of the opportunity. He went around the ward and asked the voters not to cast their votes to criminals. The voters were already disgusted with Khader and Damu. Their patience might have been tried by the battle the two fought over the tamarind tree. Groundnut Granpa won resoundingly.

As he walked to the municipal council on his first day as a member, the women came out of their houses to enjoy the sight. Children followed him up to the cement road and gave him an enthusiastic send-off.

In a week, the old man's new clothes had become dirty. He washed them overnight, and wore them the next day to the council meeting. The money leftover from his election expenses was soon gone, but as long as he had it, his family lived well, it must be said. The children had fine, new clothes. His son went to the fish-market every day. They bought two goats for milk for the children in arms. Necessary vessels were bought for the house. The old man gave up his bidis and smoked cheroots.

Happy days are few and far between in life. They tend to move too fast. Daily washing soon wore out the old man's clothes. His mill-made, double-fold veshti now had many holes. The vessels had been pawned to take care of household expenses. The wailing of hungry children assailed the old man's ears when he returned home from a council meeting.

One morning the old man took out his old sweets box and cleaned out the accumulated dust. The next morning, when he arrived at the Muslim school, barebodied as of yore, with box atop his head on a sketchy turban, and ringing his bell, the children surrounded him, shouting clamorously, 'Groundnut Granpa is back!'

Groundnut Granpa looked around at the children's faces. His own bloomed like a flower. His eyes filled.

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
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
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Githa Hariharan in Deccan Herald

The narrator:

